A Real Gift

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A Real Gift

by midsummersin

Summary

Fuck Malfoy and his pathetic pretences and his insufferable flaunting of valuable artefacts that I'll never get, Tom thought. *I don't need any of them anyway.*

He was going to get himself a *real* birthday present. 'Henry Evans'.

Tom asks (subtly threatens) Abraxas to organise his seventeenth birthday party. He doesn't foresee any of what unfolds, but he's not complaining. Well, he is, but as long as he gets the seventh-year transfer student in the end, he'll be happy.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s a month until New Year’s Eve.”

Tom, who had been sitting upright and stiff in a plush chair in the corner of the library, diligently working on the latest gruelling Transfiguration essay, snapped his gaze over to Abraxas and raised an eyebrow. Some days, Tom wondered how the blonde-haired had been sorted into Slytherin. He was not subtle in the slightest.

“Do go on,” Tom replied, just for the sake of seeking Abraxas splutter.

“Ah, well,” Abraxas said, blushing bright scarlet and forgoing all of the pureblood eloquence that should be ingrained within him. “I was just thinking. We’re all going to be staying over the Yuletide for once. Us sixth-years, that is. For our Apparition lessons. Um. Your birthday falls then… were you planning on doing anything?”

Truthfully, Tom was not. He’d always hated his birthday. It was the day his mother had given birth to him on Wools’ doorstep and proceeded to die. There was nothing to celebrate about being damned to eleven years of rations and uncaring adults and imbecilic children who called what they didn’t know the ‘work of the Devil’.

However, it was also his *seventeenth* birthday, which *was* a cause of celebration. He would no longer have the Trace on him, and he would be classed as an adult in the magical world. Boatloads of opportunities opened up for him.

And he *did* enjoy seeing Abraxas splutter. Call it payback for the twelve hundred times the blonde had called him a mudblood during his first four years at Hogwarts. Abraxas was incredibly useful now with the political influence his wealth, blood status and family name gave him, but Tom held his grudges.

“I do enjoy a surprise,” Tom replied, lying through his teeth.

Abraxas opened and closed his mouth several times, swallowed, and then eventually said, “Yes. Yes, of course, my-” he looked around the library furtively to check that no one was listening to their conversation, “Lord.”

Tom gave his brightest, and ironically most false, smile in response. "*Lovely*."

He turned back to his parchment and wondered if he was making a terrible mistake. The Malfoys *did* know how to plan parties, but oftentimes, common sense escaped Abraxas. It would not be entirely unsurprising if Abraxas smuggled in a flock (pride?) of peacocks into Hogwarts and claimed it was a very grand Malfoy coming-of-age tradition that Tom must be privy to.

On second thoughts, it wouldn't be a mistake to enslave Abraxas as his organiser regardless of how ostentatious or impractical his ideas could be. It would be nice payback to see the Malfoy stressed, and Tom would get either an incredibly amusing birthday party or a very good traditional pureblood one. A victory on all fronts, really.

Unfortunately, Tom quickly learnt that Abraxas Malfoy didn't understand what the word '*surprise'* meant. In the week that followed from their library conversation, Abraxas stopped him in the middle of everywhere and further demonstrated his lack of Slytherin subtlety.

"Tom, do you like the Transfiguration Courtyard or the spare classroom near old Sluggie's office more?" Abraxas asked him in the middle of the hallway one day following their discussion in the library. Tom narrowed his eyes; they were coming from Potions and going to Transfiguration. It was as if Abraxas was allergic to thinking too deeply.

"They're both so-so," Tom replied, unhelpfully. He didn't look over at Abraxas, but he could *feel* the anxiety rolling off the boy.

"And what's your opinion of elderberry flavoured cake?"

Tom turned up his nose in answer.

"Tom, what's your opinion of Firewhiskey?" Abraxas asked when Tom was in the middle of studiously pouring over the next week's chapter for Defense Against the Dark Arts at breakfast in the Great Hall, two days after their discussion in the library.

Tom had zero desire to expose himself to vulnerability by consuming an inhibition-lowering drink, but watching *other* people do it? It was

fun. It was also a good opportunity to stack up on new blackmail under the pretence of joining in on good gossip.

“I’m amenable to it,” Tom replied.

“Brilliant,” Abraxas answered. “What do you feel for mulled mead? Gilly water? Butterbeer? Pumpkin juice? Or do you prefer-”

Abraxas continued to list about another dozen beverages. Tom buried his head in his textbook and tried to ignore his year-mate.

“Tom, what are your opinions on dragons? Specifically, dragons alongside serpents?” Abraxas asked three days following their conversation in the library.

Tom was so idiotically dumbfounded by the random question that he stopped stirring his cauldron, an act which probably immediately reduced the potion from an ‘Outstanding’ to an ‘Exceeds Expectations’. He scowled at both the cauldron and at the blonde-haired simpleton beside him, and replied,

“I *hate* dragons.”

The correct translation of that sentence was ‘I hate *you’*, but Abraxas didn’t seem to catch onto that.

“Really?” he replied, sounding like he’d discovered a new ridiculous level of crestfallen. “I love them. I was thinking of buying a few once I take over from father as Lord of Malfoy Manor. Though, they might frighten the peacock population.”

Tom had no idea what to say to that, and his potion was suffering alongside his braincells. He turned away with a sneer and left Abraxas to stew in his stupidity.

Four days after their conversation in the library, Abraxas dropped a colour palette onto his duvet cover when he was getting ready to turn in. Tom was beginning to regret allowing (subtly threatening) him to organise his seventeenth, and not for the reasons he’d originally foreseen. He’d known Abraxas could be *annoying,* but not like *this.* Incompetent and pesky *and* annoying.

“My Lord, do you prefer forest, emerald, jade, viridian or lime green? I’m not sure why lime is here considering I asked around for shades of *dark* green, but that’s Randolph for you,” Abraxas said.

“Lime green is hideous,” Tom responded, seeping irritation into his words. “As is Viridian.”

Viridian Nott happened to be a member of their dormitory and looked up at the apparent mention of his name. Tom decided that there was no need to clarify because the truth still held regardless.

“Forest, emerald, or jade?” Abraxas said, insistently shoving the colours under his nose. “Oh, and would you prefer a cooler or warmer silver? Or even gold, I know it’s not strictly Slytherin, but-”

Tom tuned him out. The point of having him as an organiser was to *not* worry about these sorts of details, but evidently Abraxas was part troll and had yet to realise that.

“My Lord, this is only a preliminary invitation list, but would you mind looking over it?” Abraxas asked five days after their conversation in the library. They were sitting near the fire in the Slytherin Common Room. It was the first necessary question Abraxas had asked him, *and* it was asked at an appropriate time – Tom had just finished his Charms essay. Maybe even trolls were capable of learning.

“I found out that Lucretia is staying over the holidays because the Blacks don’t want her home,” Abraxas continued in a hushed tone. “But I’m not sure you’ll want her, either.”

That had been the gossip of November. Seventh-year member of noble Slytherin House and Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, Lucretia Black, announced her engagement to fellow seventh-year Ignatius Prewett, member of obnoxious Gryffindor House and known blood-traitor. Tom had already known they were dating in secret, so he’d been most annoyed by the loss of blackmail material when they’d made it public out of nowhere.

“Take her name off the list,” Tom decided after a moment. The gossip was amusing to listen to but he didn’t need any sort of controversy at his birthday party, nor did he want people to think he had any sympathy for a blood-traitor’s estrangement. “You can add the seventh-year Ravenclaw Prefect, Jasper Pyrites, though. I talked to

him yesterday, he's staying over the break."

Abraxas nodded and hastily pulled out a quill to add the boy's name to the bottom of the list. Tom glanced it over once more. All their dormmates, a few of his Knights from other year groups who were staying over the holiday, a few pureblood Slytherin sixth- and seventh-year girls who weren't overzealous or empty-headed, and three Ravenclaws including Pyrites were on the invitation list.

"Looks alright to me," Tom said. "Do you have a satisfactorily secret location yet or are we going to need a professor's approval?"

Abraxas hesitated. "Sluggie approved the use of the spare classroom near his office," he said.

But that also means he's going to pop in and out, were the words left unspoken. Tom sighed. Their Head of House wouldn't mind that there was alcohol present and he was always a good source of more sophisticated gossip, but that didn't mean that Tom wanted the simpering fool around at his birthday party.

"That's fine for now," Tom decided a little dispiritedly. "I'll let you know if I come up with a better idea."

"But I need to know the room in advance! For the invitations!" Abraxas protested, but Tom had decided to walk out of the Common Room and down to the dormitories to block him out.

"Tom," Abraxas said six days after their conversation in the library. Tom desperately tried to ignore him – they were in the middle of Transfiguration, and Dumbledore disliked him enough as it was. He didn't need to give the barmy old codger a reason to deduct an exorbitant number of points from Slytherin.

"Tom, it's traditional for-"

"*Later,"* Tom whispered. He had an urge to send an obscene gesture he'd learnt from too many years in an orphanage to the pureblood and hide it from Dumbledore's meddlesome gaze by raising his textbook, but he managed to stifle it. *Barely.*

"Tom, it's traditional for the tablecloth at a seventeen-year-old wizard's or witch's party to have some sort of flower sewn onto it," Abraxas repeated himself immediately after Dumbledore dismissed

them. “It has to be symbolic for you and it also needs to match the forest green and cool silver colour scheme I’ve got picked out. White lilies, or white carnations, white peonies or white roses – anything white would be good, I think. Here, I’ve got some sketches and I’ve got a book about the flower language for you-”

Tom watched as Abraxas pulled out a crumpled piece of parchment and a small but thick book from the mess that seemed to be his schoolbag. He resigned himself to his fate. Of course he’d have to consider *the flower language.*

On the seventh day since their initial conversation in the library, Tom was doing his rounds after curfew as Prefect when Abraxas ran down the empty corridor towards him, yelling.

“Tom! I tried to catch you earlier at dinner. I was wondering, are you interested in Arthurian legend? We have a few crystals that father thinks are from the Crystal Cave – though they’re definitely not the Crystal of Neahtid, unfortunately, because they don’t have any magical properties, but there’s value in the legend and history-”

“Five points from Slytherin for being out after curfew *and* running in the corridors,” Tom reprimanded, the words paining him to speak. “And do you understand the meaning of the word ‘*surprise’?*”

Apparently, Abraxas didn’t, because he continued, “We also have an exact replica of Godric Gryffindor’s gauntlet, not sure why-”

Tom was beginning to think that this had nothing to do with finding the Heir of Slytherin an appropriate seventeenth birthday present and more to do with flaunting the Malfoy’s extraordinary wealth.

“We also have-”

“Ten points from Slytherin,” Tom said, and walked away without any regret. Abraxas continued yelling after him about artefacts the Malfoys owned.

Perhaps, Tom considered, he had bitten off more than he could chew by enslaving Abraxas as his organiser. The blonde certainly knew how to get his revenge and poke it where it hurt.

Heir of Slytherin you might be, but you’re also Knutless, Abraxas might as well be yelling.

Tom's jaw twitched. At the very least, his coming-of-age meant he *would* be alleviating the Malfoys of one precious artefact. *He* would take better care of it and look at it more than once a century.

Unless, Abraxas simply bought him another book on the Dark Arts and called it a day. That was also a possibility.

He wasn't opposed to Dark Arts books by any means, but it would be a pathetic power play that Tom couldn't even whinge about without making *himself* look pathetic. Salazar*,* sometimes – oftentimes – he desired nothing more than to curse Abraxas Malfoy's hatefully pointy face. Hateful *and* pointy; his hate for Abraxas' face was derived from many places and was not just due to its pointiness. Most notably, his hate was derived from the fact that it was *Abraxas'* hateful face.

On the eighth day following their initial discussion in the library, Tom made sure to escape Abraxas as much as possible. This meant that he gave Randolph Lestrange the task of keeping Abraxas *away from him at all costs.* If Randolph succeeded for an entire fortnight, Tom might consider forgiving him for soaking his bed in water from the Black Lake on his very first night in Slytherin House and declaring that he was '*filthy like this water, like your bed!*'.

He *might.* He did not forgive any more often than he forgot.

To his knowledge, Randolph was currently entertaining Abraxas' nonsense in the Slytherin Common Room, so Tom headed to the library. The blonde's hovering around him in the last week had prevented him from doing further research into his secret project: immortality.

He was surprised to find that there seemed to be a conversation going on in the Restricted Section. An exasperated, hushed one at that. Tom, intrigued, decided to strain his ears rather than break it up by equipping his pleasant but stern Prefect tone.

"I don't understand why you brought me here when it's already too late!" a demanding voice said.

"Time is not a constraint," a coarse voice replied.

"I – can't you just *tell me* what I'm supposed to be doing?"

"To tell you so explicitly would be to fail."

“Oh, wonderful. You’re speaking like you’re binding me to another self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“Do not insult my abilities by likening me to a Seer.”

“You’re wearing *Trelawney’s face,* what do you… Actually, I don’t care, just get out if you’re not going to be helpful in the slightest.”

“If you so desire, Master. Never mind that you were the one to call me here in the first place.”

Following that incredibly confusing conversation, there was a thud. Tom wasn’t sure if that was the sound of a book falling to the floor or a *person,* but he thought he should probably put on his best smiling face and most amiable tone and check. And shoo the conversationalists out of the aisle, because it happened to be the one *he* wanted to look in.

Tom stepped out behind a bookcase and immediately came to a halt. There was only one occupant of the aisle – the other one must’ve slipped away – and he was looking *directly at Tom*.

He had the brightest green eyes Tom had ever seen. They were mesmerizingly, honestly – they were the exact shade and equally as vibrant as the Killing Curse that had ended his lacklustre father’s life.

Tom searched for a name, and after a little struggle, it came to him. Henry Evans. He was the seventh-year transfer student who’d sat under the Sorting Hat for seven entire minutes before it finally shouted, “GRYFFINDOR!” to a sea of bored faces.

A few days into the school year, someone had pointed out that Evans looked remarkably similar to Charlus Potter, who’d graduated a few years back. Rumours had flown around that he was an illegitimate son from somewhere in the lineage. However, the gossip petered out before October rolled around because Evans had ignored it and people got bored.

Tom hadn’t cared much for Evans or the gossip. An unacknowledged illegitimate son would give him no political sway and would have none of the Potters’ wealth. Not to mention, Gryffindors were always uninteresting, obnoxious pieces of work, and there was every chance that Evans was simply a common mudblood with an uncanny resemblance to the Potters.

He wondered if he had been a little too hasty in his decision-making.

Evans was standing in the Dark magic section of the Restricted Section, holding the very book that Tom wanted to reread – *The Secrets of the Darkest Art.* That was *very* interesting.

And he was *still* staring at Tom with those startling emerald green eyes. The boy seemed to be scrutinising him. Some strange but rather large part of Tom's brain hoped he was measuring up.

"Hello," he greeted. "I heard a thud and I thought I'd check that someone hadn't fallen over."

Evans blinked at him once, and then once again.

"That's very kind of you," Evans said. "But I'm quite alright."

There was something *off* about that. No Gryffindor caught holding an abnormally Dark book on the Dark Arts should be able to hold such an even tone. Most of them would run in the opposite direction, screaming, before they'd even read a page. The rest of them would look haunted, act incredibly awkwardly and try to hide that they'd been reading into Dark magic. Yet, Evans looked impassive. Impossibly so. No one with eyes so fiercely vivid could possibly be genuinely inexpressive.

Intrigued, Tom wordlessly probed the outermost layers of the boy's mind, wherein stray thoughts would be discounted and his intrusion would likely go unnoticed-

Crumbling stone and flaming red hair and endless black marble hallways and dark caverns filled with skeletons rising from the depths of lakes and ceaselessly multiplying golden objects and uncontrollable flames and a high, cold voice saying, 'come to die', and a flash of light and-

Tom hastily retracted the probe.

Evans blinked at him once more and began to place *The Secrets of the Darkest Art* in his bag.

"You don't have a signed note," Tom said dimly, his thoughts swirling. Who *on Earth* was Evans to just continue to stare at him when his mind was like *that?*

"No, I don't," Evans agreed, sounding far too blasé for *everything that was going on that Tom didn't understand.* He turned on his heel and exited the aisle.

Tom continued to stare at the spot Evans had been in the wake of his departure.

Fuck Malfoy and his pathetic pretences and his insufferable flaunting of valuable artefacts that I'll never get, Tom thought. *I don't need any of them anyway.*

He was going to get himself a *real* birthday present. Emerald eyes that hid mysteries and inky black hair that was just the right amount of dishevelled to be appealing and red ties that were so very cunningly misleading. He was going to get *that.*

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday to my one of my two favourites, Tom Riddle <3

Kudos and comments are appreciated!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Tom!”

The only thing Tom hated more than the sound of his name was the sound of his name coming out of Abraxas’ mouth.

Actually, that was a lie, as he also took a particular disliking to Dumbledore calling him by his given or last name. The man somehow managed to inflict an entire unwanted essay of opinions and suspicion into the two short, common words.

“Tom! Oh, thank Merlin, I’ve been looking for you everywhere! I even checked the Quidditch Pitch, Randolph insisted he’d seen you there-”

Tom didn’t know whether to be amused or horrified. Horrified, probably, because Abraxas’ presence meant that Randolph had failed the one tiny little task Tom had entrusted him with. *Two days in.*

“-the hospital wing but Madam Calderon said no one’s lost a thumb recently.”

Tom blinked. One second of distraction, and Abraxas had become utterly incomprehensible. He should stop being surprised by these things, he supposed. The pureblood defied all logic, and he meant that in the most derogatory way possible.

“It’s just as well that we ran into each other,” Tom said, the words paining him to say. As much as he’d love to run in the other direction and go reprimand Randolph, he’d come to the realisation that he actually needed to speak to Abraxas if he was going to get himself the gift of Evans for his coming-of-age.

The gift of Evans’ *secrets*, he hastily corrected himself. The gift of Evans’ *allegiance.* It wouldn’t be terrible to extend his empire into other Houses, even ones as obnoxious as Gryffindor. Evans would be a very good stepping-stone since he wouldn’t have had time to learn of all the interhouse rivalries that existed yet. That was the reason he was doing this.

“I need you to update the invitation list,” Tom continued, desperate to

put words between himself and his very sudden, very concerning thoughts. “Add Henry Evans. The seventh-year transfer student.”

Abraxas looked utterly appalled. “You want to invite *him?* He’s a-” Abraxas glanced around to check that the corridor they were in was empty, which it was, “mudblood*,* and a Gryffindor, and he’s friendly with Prewett, and not to mention, he’s also the reason why Slytherin lost the last Quidditch match. We were winning by one hundred and twenty points, and-”

Tom resisted the urge to scream. Abraxas had belittled him for *four years* despite his incredible magical prowess, and yet it seemed Abraxas’ main resentment towards Evans was not about his potential status as a mudblood, but rather about *Quidditch.* When Tom ruled over the Wizarding World, he was going to ban that barbaric game.

“Now, it wouldn’t do to let inter-house rivalries prevent us from expanding the reaches of our cause,” Tom replied, as smoothly as he could while his blood was boiling. “Besides, I’m sure you’ve heard the rumours surrounding Evans’ lineage.”

Abraxas’ eyes widened and he finally stopped talking about some inane golden ball.

“I thought no one could get an answer out of him. You succeeded? I mean, of course you did,” he quickly amended when Tom raised his eyebrows.

It was better to let Abraxas form to his own conclusions rather than potentially explicitly lie, so Tom simply paused for a second and then continued, “I trust you’ll add him to the list.”

“Yes, of course. I will, my-” a yellow-tied student walked past them “-Tom.”

“*Wonderful,*” Tom accentuated, suppressing his desire to rip the boy’s tongue out. “I also wanted to tell you that I want my colour scheme to include emerald green.”

Abraxas looked like an insect, with his stupidly wide eyes. “I’ve already got everything matching *forest green,* Tom!” he whined. He even *sounded* like an insect, his words as irritating as an insistent buzz. “I thought you agreed! You can’t say things like this days later!”

Tom rolled his eyes. It was a juvenile motion, and not one that he was usually prone to making. However, he was giving the blonde nearly

three weeks' notice; there was *nothing* to complain about.

It was truly a pity that Abraxas *wasn't actually* an insect. Insects were so very easy to squash; doing the same to a human was much harder and was also classed as *murder*. He didn't have many qualms about that, but the following investigation would be very irritating, as this was unfortunately Britain's wealthiest pureblood heir. It would be even more unbearable than Abraxas' wide eyes and whiny voice and trollish brain.

"I want emerald green," Tom said firmly, quelling his murderous inclinations.

"No, no, you don't understand! Cool silver won't match emerald green, I'll have to get everything changed to a more neutral, metallic silver. Gold would be better*,* but that won't fit with serpents!" Abraxas turned a pathetic imploring gaze to him. "Tom, you have to understand, you're asking for a disaster!"

"I'm sure it'll turn out quite alright," Tom replied, giving the blonde a pat on the shoulder in a manner that was more scathing than soothing.

"It's *your* birthday party, don't you want it not to be-" Abraxas stopped himself mid-sentence because Tom had decided to drop all pretences of warmth from his expression. The blonde swallowed, looked away from his steely gaze, and stammered, "I'll – I'll find a way to fit gold and emerald green in with serpent emblazoning."

Tom didn't bother replying his usual falsely cheerful '*lovely'* or '*wonderful'*. He turned away, but to his utmost disgust, Abraxas grabbed his forearm. In a rare moment of clarity, Abraxas seemed to realise that was a mistake; the pureblood dropped it and his cheeks went aflame.

"My Lord," Abraxas mumbled. "I – I merely wish to ask what time you want the party to start and roughly finish. So I can put it on the invitations. I've, um, well, I was going to send them out tomorrow, but now I need to change the colour scheme, which will – um, never mind. I'll have them done in two shakes of a snake's tail."

Yes, Tom thought, allowing a small smile to grace his face. Abraxas humbling himself was a sight he deserved to see more often.

"Say, from eight onwards," Tom replied. "And I suppose I could let it bleed into a New Years celebration. Someone will have to-"

He stopped himself mid-sentence. Someone needed to Confund Slughorn if he poked around after midnight; their Head of House wasn't likely to be *excessively* lenient, even if this was his favourite student's birthday and it was in the midst of the winter break. However, trusting Abraxas – or anyone at all – with that task would a bad idea as they were all likely to be inebriated. Tom was better off doing that himself.

"Never mind. Have a night," Tom finished, hoping the absence of 'good' would discourage Abraxas from continuing to talk to him.

It didn't work. Abraxas insisted on following him down the corridor.

"Have *a night?* What does that mean?"

"Why would I explain the intricacies of a maze when you're still trying to find your way out of a paper bag?" Tom muttered rhetorically, hastening his pace in his desperation to get away from the blonde.

"Finding my way out of a… paper bag?"

"It's a metaphor, you *imbecile*."

Thankfully, whatever absurd, worrisomely unintelligent comment Abraxas would surely come up with in response, Tom didn't hear. He turned the corridor and was out of earshot.

The following morning, Randolph was nowhere to be seen. This was most aggravating, as not only did it mean that Tom couldn't wring his neck for being *an utter failure,* but it also meant that he was subjected to Abraxas' nonsense for all of breakfast. Thankfully, breakfast was only breakfast; there was plenty more hours in the day, and Tom intended to use them to their fullest potential.

A few hours later, Tom stood outside of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, watching chattering seventh-year students filter out through the doors. He was waved to by several Slytherins, and with great reluctance, he responded in kind.

See, Evans was *incredibly* annoying to find, and he couldn't afford to get distracted and miss his chance. That had already happened far too many times; in the three days since they'd spoken in the library, Tom

had lost sight of the Gryffindor at the turn of the corridor or amongst the crowd no less than seven times.

He'd even relinquished his dignity for this opportunity. After Abraxas had ruined his night and Tom had returned to the Common Room, he'd deigned to speak to the first seventh-year he'd seen. Unfortunately, that happened to be Walburga Black. He'd suffered through much unenjoyable high-pitched shrieking about who-knows-what, before she had eventually told him that the seventh-year Slytherins shared Defense with the Gryffindors and supplied him with a time.

"Tom!"

Speak of the Devil, Tom thought dryly.

"Are you waiting to escort someone? You should've told me – I could've helped set you up!"

"You have the wrong idea, Walburga," Tom replied, his eyes fixed desperately on the Defense door. A group of seventh-year Gryffindors exited, but they were all girls.

"I was only joking," Walburga said in her unnecessarily loud and highly unappealing voice. She straightened her shoulders haughtily. "Well, shall we go to lunch?"

She reached out for his arm and threatened to shove her thick black hair in his personal space. Several things raced through his horrified mind at once: least importantly in his opinion, Walburga was *betrothed* (arranged, and to her second cousin, but the point regarding her astounding faithlessness stood), and most importantly, *he was not interested and he would never be.* For starters, her black hair was long and straight. It wasn't to his tastes, not that he would ever have any sort of inclinations-

Shorter and very distinct, very messy black hair emerged from the Defense doorway. Relief washed over Tom as he muttered out an 'excuse me'. He smoothly side-stepped Walburga's advances and tuned her loud proclamations out.

"Evans," Tom greeted a few steps later, his smile slipping when he noted that Evans was accompanied by none other than the blood-traitor Prewett. Then again, there weren't many good choices of acquaintances to make from within Gryffindor House.

Evans spun around. There was slight uneasiness present on his face. Tom would also feel uneasy if he was forced to be friendly with Prefect Prewett for the sake of not becoming isolated within his House.

“Riddle.”

That was a good start. Evans was already aware of his name. He hadn’t been sure, considering the boy was new and in a different House and year-group.

Tom cleared his throat. “Is it possible to speak to you in private?” Prewett was still standing stiffly next to Evans as if he was wanted or needed.

“I suppose so,” Evans responded. He glanced over at Prewett, and the two of them bid their goodbye as Gryffindors do; with unspoken words floating in the air whose meaning Tom had never been able to work out exactly.

“I wanted to let you know,” Tom started, but before he could get anything else said, he was interrupted by Professor Merrythought’s breezy voice.

“Evans? Oh, wonderful, you’re still here. I’m so sorry to interrupt your conversation, but I was meaning to ask you to stay behind.”

Tom let out a shuddering breath. Merrythought’s ideas were so immovable, so staunch, so black-and-white, and he'd started to dislike her in his very first year, but he’d never been more annoyed at her than now. He’d suffered through Walburga *twice* just for *this*.

“Yes, of course, Professor,” Evans answered. There wasn’t surprise or trepidation scrawled on his face, not that Tom had really expected to see either. It wasn’t the neutrality that he *had* been excepting, though. He wasn’t sure what it was. Relief? Surely not. “Sorry, Riddle, I’ll-”

“You’re talking to Riddle? Oh, you can finish your conversation and then come on in, it’s so wonderful to see pleasant interhouse interaction. And my two most brilliant students, nonetheless…”

The doddery old woman who loved to interrupt everyone’s sentences returned back inside her classroom. They both stared after her, and Tom believed there was a sort of companionship in the mutual gesture. It was an incredibly odd feeling for him, but not necessarily an unwelcome one.

“I’ve heard rumours that she’s retiring at the end of this school year,” Tom said, providing an opening for an *opinion* – a shared, low opinion of their Defense teacher, hopefully – because so far, Evans had been a closed book to him.

Unfortunately, this time was much the same. Several emotions seemed to flicker within Evans’ eyes, but his face remained impassive. Tom couldn’t understand any of it; how did he manage to look so *vibrant* while simultaneously presenting emotionlessness?

“I’ve heard similar,” Evans eventually replied.

Tom frowned. Merrythought’s impending retirement was a closely guarded secret within the teaching staff. He’d only become aware of it by chance; Merlin knows how Evans had heard.

Perhaps that was the take-away. Evans was either a liar – though that also didn’t make sense, because Evans shouldn’t be aware that there was anything to be gained from lying in an attempt to impress him – or he was just simply… inexplicable.

“Oh.” Tom hesitated. “Well, I wanted to tell you that Madam Plummly will notice that you’ve stolen a book if you don’t return it soon.”

“Ah, that’s very kind of you,” Evans said. “I’ll return it later today.”

Evans, Tom thought, was infuriating as much as he was fascinating. His entirely-too-even tone meant he couldn’t tell if the Gryffindor was humouring him or making fun of him or simply being polite.

At a loss, Tom decided he should do the responsible thing, and said, “Do try not to steal any more books from the library, I’ll have to deduct House points next time.”

“That would be unideal,” Evans agreed, nodding. He started in the direction of the Defense classroom, but Tom found he didn’t want it to be the end of their conversation. There was *something* unnatural in the even tone, in the neutral expression. It piqued Tom’s curiosity; he wanted to *unravel* Evans.

It was a strange desire.

Tom shook himself from his thoughts. He quoted, “Merrythought said you were one of her most brilliant students.”

It was another opening. An opportunity for Evans to reveal something

of himself, so Tom could start building an image of who Evans actually *was,* beyond just the simple facts of transfer student, red-tied, seventh-year. He needed to find the mould of a person before he could manipulate it like clay or putty, after all.

Evans turned back. “I did something on accident and now she believes I’ve invented spells.”

“And have you?”

Evans laughed slightly. Somehow, it came out just as neutrally and as emotionlessly as almost everything else he did.

“I’m far from a genius,” he said.

That is not an answer, Tom thought, watching the Gryffindor re-enter Merrythought’s classroom with a thoughtful expression.

Later that afternoon, Tom entered the Restricted Section. There were no hushed conversation in his favourite aisle this time, which frankly he found to be disappointing. He would’ve liked to have run into Evans again; Tom found the quantity of questions in his mind growing evermore.

It seemed Evans could be trusted to hold his word. *The Secrets Of The Darkest Art* lay in its correct shelf, between leather-bound books describing psychedelic potions and dangerous, ancient rituals performed at every lunar phase. Tom fingered the spine of the thick volume, contemplative, before taking it out of the bookcase with greedy hands.

He wondered what the boy could’ve possibly wanted from the book. He was very quick at pinning down the motivations, the fears and secrets and dreams of others, but he’d hit a roadblock of nightmares without even truly entering Evans’ mind, and the boy’s behaviour didn’t give him much of an indication, either. Knowing that Evans had read *his* Dark Arts volume didn’t help him much, either – the book outlined everything from ancient rituals to catoptromancy to soul magic to necromancy.

Evan reminded him of himself, he realised. His background was as uncertain as Tom’s had been, initially. He was perfectly even and polite, but it was not meekness his behaviour was underpinned by, not submissiveness or empty-headedness; rather, it was an inherent,

unshakeable confidence. If Tom wasn't wrong to draw parallels to himself, then there was danger lurking beneath Evans' presented personality.

That still didn't answer any of his questions, however. It didn't help him find or manipulate Evans' mould. It didn't tell him what Evans had been looking for, in *his* book, it didn't tell him if Evans was as Dark as he was, it didn't tell him what the *hell* he had seen in Evans' mind, it didn't tell him anything of Evans' history, nor of his fears or secrets or dreams, and didn't tell him why on Earth Evans had been Sorted into *Gryffindor*.

He supposed he would have to put the mystery of Evans to the side for a bit – at least until Slughorn's small, end-of-term gathering between his favourite Slytherins was over. That was a week from now, on the following Thursday. He'd been planning the farce ever since his father's corpse had hit the floor, Mozart playing faintly in the background from a record player. It was a little horrifying that he'd allowed *both* Abraxas and Evans to occupy his mind so thoroughly when his schemes were so close from finally, finally coming into fruition.

Tom flipped through *The Secrets of the Darkest Art*, landing on the section titled 'Horcrux'. Hoping to discover references to plurality wasn't his purpose in re-reading the section; he knew already there were none. Rather, his purpose was *perfection, flawlessness.* It would be all-too-easy to get carried away in Slughorn's office and accidentally reveal that he knew far more about the process than just a curious student should. He had to remind himself of what academia, and not his own personal experience, could tell him. The confused and innocently eager scholar look was essential.

As he committed every sentence to memory and rehearsed his flattering dialogues, the same image of emerald-green eyes, messy black hair and slightly crooked red tie with small hands that gripped a thick volume routinely entered his mind. He could help but wonder if, by standing here, it was he that was mirroring Evans, or if it was the other way around, or if he was imagining parallels were there were none. *Horcrux, horcrux, horcrux…* he wondered if Evans had seen that section, if he had read it, if he had been dumbfounded by the heavily implied singularity of the word.

Slughorn, Tom thought to himself, a little desperately. *Slughorn is the simpering fool I'm hoping to reel information from, not Evans. A student couldn't possibly be more knowledgeable than a teacher in this realm.* Yet,

he could not stop his brain from continually fumbling over half-formed thoughts and what-ifs.

Chapter End Notes

There are a lot of things I could say about what I was originally going to do with this chapter and where it actually went. Oops.

I hope you enjoyed this update anyway <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Deep within the Forbidden Forest, where the foliage was so thick that the area was shrouded in a permanent twilight despite the sun shining directly overhead, Harry stood before a herd of thestrals. They were eerily beautiful as ever with their reptilian heads, skeletal, semi-opaque black bodies, leathery wings and sharp fangs.

He had settled into a life in Hogwarts fifty years in the past surprisingly easily; winning Quidditch games for the House team helped greatly. However, he couldn't deny that the feeling of *not quite right* nagged at him. The castle was missing Ron and Hermione, after all.

Every Saturday, after a long week cooped up in the castle that wasn't *his* castle, in the grounds that just weren't *quite* right, he'd come here, deep within the Forbidden Forest. It was as if he had a deeply-strung connection to this place that kept pulling him back, week after week.

He supposed that wasn't so surprising. He had seen far more death than he would prefer, had died himself, and had mastered it in the loosest sense of the word. It made complete sense that he would feel at home with majestic but misunderstood creatures who were also entwinned with death.

He spent his hours here wistfully. The thestrals reminded him of Hagrid and Luna and the entire of Department of Mysteries debacle. They reminded him of his *friends,* those brave, brave souls who had traversed England in the dead of the night with him, for him – for Sirius.

Although he had made friends in the '40s, they wouldn't ever understand him on such a deep level that those five, Ron and Hermione and Neville and Ginny and Luna, had. They had no idea of his struggles, his sacrifices, his triumphs or even his *name.*

Harry sighed and withdrew his right hand from where it had been patting the smallest thestral's shining neck. *Small* was not a particularly accurate descriptor, however; she was roughly the same height as him. He'd named her Grace, though perhaps Attitude

would've been more appropriate.

Grace stared at him, opened her mouth wide and presented fangs as if to demonstrate displeasure, and then walked away with a distinctive haughtiness. He shook his head, a smile ghosting his lips; he knew that she'd be back in ten minutes.

With his newly freed hand, his reached into right pocket and withdrew a green envelope with '*Henry Evans'* written on it, in decorative, loopy handwriting. The elaborate wax seal was already broken. Harry withdrew the parchment inside, and as if on cue, a figure materialised before him. Harry barely paid attention to the fact that it was Viktor Krum's silhouette before shaking the parchment and speaking, his words coming out angrily.

"Tell me, *why on Earth* did I receive an invitation to Voldemort's birthday party this morning?"

"I would presume it would be because you were invited, Master."

"Master," Harry deadpanned. "If I truly were your Master, I wouldn't be in 1943, and I certainly wouldn't be getting *birthday invites* from school-aged *Voldemort.*"

"Old friends, then," Death replied, in its hoarse, croaky voice that never changed regardless of whomever it chose to impersonate.

"Old friends," Harry muttered, half-derisively, half in agreeance. Death *had* been a close companion throughout his entire life, from constant starvation in early childhood, to the warzone that Voldemort made of his teenage years. Still, he'd prefer to be speaking to the *actual* Viktor Krum. "I don't think friends kidnap each other backwards in time."

"Your Hermione did, at your Dumbledore's suggestion."

Harry stared at the abstract entity wrapped in a visage of humanity. Stared hard and furiously. Being thrown a few hours back in time was *not the same* as being thrown fifty-odd years back. Unfortunately, those sorts of details were unimportant to eternal and inevitable concepts like Death. It was an exercise in futility to argue. Sighing to himself, Harry restarted the conversation.

"I'm sure Voldemort overheard some of our conversation the other day. You intended that. You planned me getting caught with that stupid book and catching his obsessive and insane eye and getting

invited to a *birthday party.”*

Unbidden, an image of a snake-faced Voldemort appeared in his mind. He had a party hat on his white, bald head, and he was pulling the end of a party-popper while blowing into a party-horn. Harry snorted; travelling through time had loosened a screw somewhere in his brain.

“You called me, not the other way around. Your logic is flawed.”

Harry rubbed his forehead. Discussions with Death never got easier; on the contrary, they seemed to get more ambiguous. When Death had worn Dumbledore’s face at King’s Cross, there had been vague nonsensical things said, yes, but he’d also gotten so many answers, finished so many conversations. Now he got… this.

“Is it truly so much to ask, what you expect me to do with Voldemort?” Harry returned. “I mean, I first thought you wanted me to stop the creation of horcruxes because you said, ‘time is not a constraint’. I *assumed* that meant he hadn’t even come across the term ‘horcrux’ yet. But now he’s told me about Merrythought’s retirement. He says that in Slughorn’s memories. He’s already got one, hasn’t he? If not two, since I have no idea when Slughorn’s little office get-together happens. What *am* I here for, when it seems to *not* be preventing horcruxes? All I’ve been born and raised for is to defeat Voldemort; do you expect me to murder a teenager?”

Harry said that all very fast and took a few deep, heaving breaths once he’d finished. Viktor Krum’s face stared at him, blinking periodically.

“Over seven hundred years I have waited,” Death said eventually. “Since the two forever foolish brothers and third one who wizened only at the end. Seven hundred years that I have waited for you, and you are an idiot.”

“Firstly, you’re omnipresent,” Harry parroted Death’s own melodramatic reel from a few weeks prior, “so you’ve not waited a single second yet you’ve also waited eternity-”

“Precisely.”

“-and secondly, I don’t care how many times you call me an idiot, I want my questions *answered.*”

“Have you forgotten your greatest strength, *the power the Dark Lord knows not*? It would serve you well to remember that while Tom Riddle has fashioned the name Voldemort already, he has not yet

taken up the mantle of a Dark Lord."

Harry stared. "What the hell-" he began, but Death had already left, leaving him to stare at the entire herd of thestrals that had wandered very close and surrounded them. Grace had returned and was head-butting his hand, evidently desperate for his attention. He would've found the herd's closeness unnerving only a few months ago, but now, he found it strangely comforting. Solidarity in being misunderstood, he supposed.

"The power he knows not," Harry muttered, reaching out to pat the silky skin of Grace's neck with his left hand. That was obvious enough: Voldemort never understood love. Never wanted to; he believed it a weakness, believed Dark magic usurped all.

The rest of that declaration? Not so clear. Tom Riddle *had* taken up Voldemort's mantle already – the Chamber of Secrets had been opened, four people were dead because of him, and Slytherin House already called him their Lord in private.

Yet again, it seemed Harry was missing something. It was truly too much to hope for, that he'd be given clear, explicit instructions just once.

Harry realised his right hand was still grasping Tom Riddle's birthday invite. "And what the hell do I do with this?"

Grace made an eery, shrill noise and threw her head back in response. Harry, unfortunately, did not know how to translate thestral.

"I agree, girl," he said to her all the same. "I'll do this the way I always do: the scientific method of fuck around and find out."

*

Tom much preferred to spend his free time alone, but he couldn't deny that there was much satisfaction to be garnered from parading around the school as an unchallenged leader.

Over the past year, his Sundays at Hogwarts had developed into a routine that he was quite fond of. At some point or the other, himself and his loyal circle would leave the Slytherin Common Room and end up in any number of spots in the school: by the Black Lake, or in the Courtyard, or they'd steal the Astronomy Tower for themselves, or they'd venture to the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest. It'd start as a cross-year study group that had merely moved locations from the

Common Room to outside, but over a few hours, boredom would set in and they'd switch topics. Some weeks, it would be purely gossip, but most times, Tom would shorten the reins on the conversation. They'd set up Privacy Wards, and they'd delve into planning Tom's regime, discussing politics and already-made alliances in the outside world and so on. None of them were *fully* aware of what he was working towards, of course – a pawn on a chessboard cannot see directly ahead of itself.

That Sunday, he walked along the corridors and out of the Courtyard front and centre of the pack of a dozen. He knew he would later guide the conversation into a more political one, so he'd intended to lounge around the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest. It was vital they were the farthest away from any meddlesome students and teachers.

However, he stopped in his tracks halfway across the lawn. There was a spectacle going on: spells were hurtling through the air.

"Isn't that Prewett?" asked Randolph Lestrange, following Tom's gaze. Tom was startled by the sound of his voice; it had been days since he'd heard it. Randolph had been busy keeping Abraxas away from him, and then he'd spent a few days in the Hospital Wing, apparently courtesy of Abraxas' hexing. Tom hadn't bothered to get the whole story because he'd been too annoyed at the boy's failure to *keep Abraxas away from him.*

"Oh, it *is,*" responded Conan Dolohov, a fifth-year. He nudged Tom's shoulder. "Cursing other students, that's got to be at least a twenty point loss for the lions."

Tom's stomach twisted in disgust. He *despised* people touching him and telling him what to do. It was a real pity that he couldn't gift himself the early birthday present of Conan's corpse and he had to content himself with stepping out of his inferior's reach.

"I don't think they're cursing each other," Abraxas commented, squinting.

That seemed to be true; there were several joyous spectators, and only one opponent was throwing spells. The other was holding up a translucent shield that glinted in the sunlight – and Tom realised he had very distinctive messy hair.

"No, they're not, they're friends. That's the transfer student," said Jerome Rosier, a seventh-year.

“Evans,” Tom supplied instinctively.

“Evans,” Jerome nodded. “I wonder if he went to Durmstrang before Hogwarts. They teach the Dark Arts there, or so I’ve heard. He’s suspiciously good at Defense.”

Tom spun around to face his Knight, his interest piqued. Evans hadn’t explicitly told him why Merrythought liked him; now was his chance find out. “Oh?” he asked, grimacing when it came out too hopeful.

“He cast a corporeal Patronus the other week when we were studying Lethifolds,” Jerome replied.

“That’s the opposite of the Dark Arts, idiot,” sniggered Alphonse Avery, another seventh-year.

Jerome shrugged. “Well, I’m just saying, Lethifolds are Dark creatures, aren’t they? Besides, remember when we were studying Inferi? He knew more than Merrythought.”

“Well, that isn’t hard, is it?” Alphonse chortled. “Though I admit, you’re right. Talked like he’s seen one of the things. Maybe even raised one himself. Maybe he’s an Acolyte sent to spy on Dumbledore.”

“Isn’t he a mudblood?” Randolph asked, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

“Grindelwald doesn’t care about blood status,” Jerome pointed out, but he got drowned out by seventh-year Dominic Mulciber.

“Nah – can’t be. He’s too good for mudblood. See – the shield he’s holding against Prewett right now, it’s *wandless.* I swear I’ve seen him do it with *Stupefy* and *Expelliarmus,* too. I’ll eat hippogriff dung if a mudblood can do that.”

Tom noted that that all his seventh-year Knights’ voices held a hint of admiration – begrudging, but it was admiration all the same. He felt a flicker of irritation rise within him; his Knights were supposed to admire only *his* magical talent. However, he'd never seen another student perform wandless magic before. It wasn’t on the curriculum, and for a good reason. It required incredible magical power, a strong will, exceptional control, and *practise*.

Tom found excitement overshadowing his irritation. He’d *known* there was something special – *useful, wieldable*, he corrected – about Evans.

“Tom said he’s a Potter bastard,” Abraxas supplied, and Tom resisted the urge to do a great many things, including harmless groaning and not-so-harmless murder. He had *implied,* for the sake of not wasting time explaining himself to someone who didn’t deserve it. If his *implication* came back to hurt his reputability… well, Abraxas would be on the receiving end of his creativity.

“Potter bastard,” Randolph muttered. “Like that’s a whole lot better.”

Abraxas seemingly missed the heavy dislike in Randolph’s tone, because his response was cheerful. “Evans is on Tom’s invitation list, and I see why, now – Tom, where are you going?”

Tom didn’t bother responding, for it was blatantly obvious. He was striding across the lawn, towards the group of Gryffindors. As he drew nearer, he realised more accurately what was going on: it was a mock duel, a spar. Prewett was practicing his non-verbal repertoire, and Evans just seemed to be testing how long his wandless shield could hold.

It wasn’t a reliable test. Prewett’s wordless spells were so slow and weak. Evans should have a better opponent to hone his skills with. Him, for instance.

Fortunately, the two Gryffindors were smart enough to recognise the mismatched magical prowess. By the Tom strode up to the gathered group, the duel had ended. A new mock one had sprung up between two girls who were so insignificant that Tom would be hard-pressed to find their surnames even in his expansive and organised mind.

When Evans saw him, the Gryffindor raised his eyebrows as a question and a greeting. His face was flushed red from exertion, and Tom privately thought that it was quite a good look on his sun-kissed complexion.

“When did you learn wandless magic?” Tom asked, side-stepping a stray bolt of light that came from Gryffindor girls’ non-verbal sparring. An apology was yelled to him, but Tom ignored it.

“A bit overly-familiar, aren’t we?” Evans replied, his brilliant green eyes seeming to stare right through him. Tom resisted the urge to swallow – he did not do anxious gestures. “Say, do you normally invite people to birthday parties without introducing yourself?”

Tom could not refer to a ‘normal’ because he’d never had a birthday party. There was no need to disclose that, however.

“Forgive me,” he responded mildly, and held out his hand. “Tom Riddle, and it’s nice to meet you.”

For one terrible second, Tom thought Evans wasn’t going to take his hand. Thankfully, he was wrong, and Gryffindor grasped it with a very warm, slightly calloused hand.

“Henry Evans, though you already know that,” Evans returned.

Tom nodded in concession, and decided to take his chances. “Now that we’ve introduced, is that a confirmation?”

“I got the invite yesterday, and the confirmation date is the eighteenth. Five days from now,” Evans pointed out, which was neither a ‘*yes*’ nor a ‘*no*’ and incredibly infuriating. At least, he didn’t seem to be offended by Tom’s faux pas. “And I don’t understand why I was invited. We’ve hardly spoken, and I’m not in your… gang.”

Tom frowned. “I’m not sure where you got the idea of a gang from.”

“No?” Evans gestured over Tom’s shoulder.

Tom turned to see that indeed, their conversation had several Slytherin spectators. His Knights were clearly waiting on him, but he couldn’t find it in himself to have an ounce of gratefulness; their presence was apparently hindering his progress with Evans.

“They’re just being good friends, waiting for me,” Tom replied, as convincingly as he could. “As for why I invited you? I would like to get to know you more.”

Evans raised a wandless shield to absorb another stray bolt of light from the ongoing mock duel. Rather than contemplate about whether he *should* be deducting points from the Gryffindors for their lack for safety considerations, Tom followed the movement of Evans’ arm with his eyes, greedily. It was *gorgeous,* that quick reaction, the magical power that clearly lay within him.

“And as I said, your wandless magic is impressive,” Tom added.

“Thanks,” Evans replied, his expression momentarily contorting in a way that made little sense. “That’s high praise, coming from whom Merrythought labelled as brilliant. I imagine you’re capable of it yourself?”

Tom was not impressed that his talent seemed to be limited by

Merrythought's descriptors in the boy's mind, but there was time to change that.

"I've been doing some simple wandless magic, like levitation and summoning, for a long time," Tom divulged. Indeed, he'd mastered both before he'd even come to Hogwarts. He'd even inflicted a watered-down version of the Imperius upon the conniving children at Wool's and forced them to tell the truth. "Still, I can't say my wandless repertoire is particularly large."

"Neither can I," Evans replied. "I blew up the plumbing system the time I tried to wash the dishes wandlessly."

Tom wasn't quite sure what to say to that. Evans seemed totally contradictory. Blowing up a plumbing system would indicate a lack of control of emotions and magical power, yet Evans always seemed to be perfectly calm and neutral around him.

But then there was his eyes, and his mind. His eyes *burned* with emotion Tom couldn't describe, so intense that it couldn't possibly be healthy, and the outer edges of his mind had been a nightmare.

A façade, then. Evans might be a typical emotional Gryffindor after all, but he wore a mask of neutrality. The question was, to what end?

"Oi, Henry!" It was one of the girls who'd been sparring wordlessly – poorly, weakly – a minute ago. "We're all bored, do you want to come back to the castle with us?"

Tom hesitated for a second, and then hastily made up his mind.

He'd duelled every single one of his Knights, to gauge their potential uses for him while ascertaining his own dominance over them. If all went as planned, he *would* have Evans' allegiance by the time his birthday was over and the new year came. He very much needed to duel the boy at some point. (Soon, preferably, because Evans' intrigue was incinerating the scarce scraps of patience he had.)

"You seem to be quite fine with wandless duelling spells, and I've never duelled anyone wandlessly before; would you like to try it out sometime?" Tom asked.

Evans tilted his head. Like with the handshake, Tom thought for a dreadful second that he was going to decline or not respond. Thankfully, after that long second, he nodded.

“I’ve got Quidditch practice on Monday night, but Tuesday could work,” Evans said, and Tom wondered if he should backtrack every single one of his thoughts he’d ever had about the Gryffindor. He didn’t, however, because that would make him as easily influenced by the word ‘Quidditch’ as Abraxas. Any comparison to that blonde was not desirable.

“I’ve got Prefect patrol, I’d rather not be tired for that,” Tom countered. “Wednesday?”

“Sure,” Evans replied. “Meet me on the seventh floor after dinner.”

“We’ll be duelling in a spare classroom?”

Evans opened his mouth to respond, but he was interrupted by a shout from the same Gryffindor girl.

“Are you coming or not, Henry?”

“One second, Jazz!” Evans yelled in response, and then turned back to Tom. “See you Wednesday, I guess.”

“Is she your girlfriend?” Tom pondered.

“What? No, Jasmine’s a friend from Quidditch. She’s our captain and plays Chaser.”

Whatever that was supposed to mean. Frankly, Tom wasn’t sure why he’d asked at all.

“Oh. Okay. See you Wednesday.”

Tom watched Evans’ retreating figure until Randolph committed an act of the most heinous nature; he placed a hand on Tom’s shoulder to grab his attention.

“Tom, tell me you’re not serious. Abraxas said you want that mudblood – or bastard, or mudblood and bastard – to join our cause.”

Just like that, his good mood was ruined. Tom spun around and sneered, “Say that again when you can perform wandless magic. Or when your family *isn’t* secretly hiding away a child that’s both a bastard and a Squib. Rigel, isn’t his name? Which Black did your mother cosy up to?”

Tom took immense glee from the expression on Randolph’s face. He’d been holding onto that piece of information for *years.*

“Don’t worry,” Tom continued, his voice saccharine sweet. “Your family’s *little dirty secret* is safe with me, as long as your loyalty remains to me.”

He paused, for dramatic effect. “Let’s go back, shall we? They’re all looking a little bit anxious, and we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

Randolph stared back at him, his face a shade paler than usual, his mouth opening and closing. Tom wondered how he’d contented himself with the likes of Randolph and Abraxas. Pallid skin that seemed an inch away from death; that was the Lestranges. Colourless hair with all life gelled out of it; that was the Malfoys. He’d moved onto greater things, now.

*

Tom had decided on Friday he should leave everything else out of his mind until his business with Slughorn was finished, but by the end of Sunday, he had reevaluated that. He was the greatest wizard of his age, and he would undoubtedly become the greatest wizard of all time; multi-tasking was not above him.

The first order of business was extremely easy to take care of. When Randolph slipped out to visit the Owlery later on Sunday night, Tom followed him. It took no trouble at all to pluck the letter from the boy’s grasp; a simple Summoning Charm worked wonders.

“They’ll be no letters home about my awareness of your family’s little secret,” Tom said calmly, pocketing the wax-sealed envelope. Further proof, just in case Randolph’s loyalty swayed. A few stuttered ‘*my Lord*’s later that Tom merely smiled through, he continued, “I want you to pick up your old task. Keep Abraxas away from me.”

Wisely, Randolph agreed despite his obvious trepidation. He *had* just gotten out of the Hospital Wing from one of Abraxas’ hexes, after all, but that wasn’t Tom’s worry. His worry was that *Abraxas* managed to hit one of his better duellists – how had that come about?

Still: not of utmost concern. Randolph wouldn’t fail this time, Tom was sure, not when there was one of those fun little pureblood family secrets on the line.

On Monday morning, Tom watched a tawny owl drop a package onto the lap of Deimos Carrow, a fourth-year Slytherin. It only took two

minutes and a subtle threat before he relieved the boy of his package with an insincere smile. His penniless years in an orphanage weren't for naught: he knew how to get around being Knutless in the wizarding world.

Tom spent the rest of breakfast sneaking glances at the Gryffindor table. This was quite difficult, as Viridian Nott had decided to be a swine and situate himself right in front of Tom's view of the lions' table. Thankfully, he saw all that he probably would at breakfast, anyway.

Evans, he learnt, interacted in a friendly manner with half of Gryffindor table. It was almost impressive how he seemed to have woven himself into the Gryffindor house in a few short months. He also seemed to be friendly with the current Head Boy, the Hufflepuff Abbotts.

He was *excellent* choice of stepping-stone, Tom internally commended himself.

(Evans' popularity, Tom reflected, was probably something to do with Quidditch; all the players on the House teams seemed to be guaranteed it.

Sometimes, Tom thought with great disgust towards himself, that it was an enormous let-down that he had never shown promise on a broom. It would've been a far easier route to respectability. Nevertheless, he had gotten his dominance over Slytherin House in the end, and as an act of revenge, he *would* end the Quidditch madness, one day.)

At the end of Potions on Monday, Tom name-dropped Evans to Slughorn. His Head of House seemed just as perplexed by the boy as Tom was.

"Evans," the professor responded, scratching his wobbling chin. "Yes, the name's familiar. He turns in perfect potions every time but doesn't seem to understand the theory at all. A peculiar student, really…"

Tom allowed him to trail off, slightly disappointed. Slughorn usually had far more to say about a student's prospects and far more gossip to divulge than that.

Slughorn's opinion seemed to be reflected in every student and

professor he asked, however. They dropped a few pieces of information regarding Evans that were interesting but not particularly useful. Evans had “a death wish on the Quidditch pitch”, “probably fucked with the school’s Silver Arrow he claimed”, told “stories more insane than Raczidan” and was “loud in Beery’s class, but quiet as anything in Dumbledore’s”. Everyone called him ‘strange’ or ‘odd’ or ‘funny’, or in Orion Black’s case, “-traumatised. I tried introducing myself to him in Defense, and he looked at me like I was a ghost. And when he apologised the next week he explained that I reminded him of someone he knew. Like, past tense.”

By the time Wednesday night rolled around, Tom had very subtly questioned over a dozen people for their opinions on the transfer student. As he strode through the hallways and up the staircases to the seventh floor, he recalled a conversation he had overheard completely on accident in the library on Monday evening.

“I’ve Quidditch practice after dinner, so I need to finish this awful fourteen-inch essay Slughorn set us before then,” the first Gryffindor girl had groaned.

“Quidditch? Tell Henry I said hi. I’m jealous of you, Jazz, it’s so easy for you to talk to him all the time,” the second Gryffindor girl had responded.

“Amy, I’ll be playing Quidditch, not getting you a date,” Jazz – Jasmine? – had replied, sounding distressed.

“He’s so dreamy,” Amy had continued. “All these roguish stories he tells, but he’s so polite – he’s like Prince Charming, I’m telling you.”

“…Prince Charming?”

“Muggle thing, Jazz – my point is, he’d be so submiss-”

“I’m his teammate, I don’t need to hear this, Amy – but Henry isn’t like that. Have you even had an actual conversation with him? He’s all masculine confidence.”

“Oh. That’s even better, I mean, have you seen his thighs in Quidditch gear?”

Tom hadn’t heard any more of the exchange because he’d picked his books up and fled from the library.

He felt like fleeing now, too. He’d reached the seventh floor, and he couldn’t *possibly* greet Evans while his mind was looping such an

awful, improper conversation.

Fleeing wouldn't get him anything in the long run, however. It wouldn't get an Evans at his birthday party and it wouldn't get him Evans' allegiance. Tom straightened his shoulders and turned the corridor.

Evans was right there, leaning against a stony pillar. Upon seeing him, the Gryffindor furrowed his brow and said, "Did you run here? You don't really seem the type."

Tom opened his mouth to reply that he *wasn't* the type, for he would never do something so uncouth as run through the school, but he realised his face was burning red. It was better to pretend he had been exerting himself than admit to what he'd been thinking of, so he replied, "Something like that. Did you say we were using a spare classroom?"

"Ah, no," Evans replied. They traversed the corridor, then turned left. The Gryffindor approached a bare stretch of stone opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

Tom watched in a mixture of confusion and horror as he strode past the bare wall once, twice, thrice. A door appeared in the wall, and before he turned the brass doorknob, Evans looked back at him.

"What?" he said to Tom's expression. "You can't possibly be so narcissistic to assume that you were the only one to find the Room of Requirement, can you?"

Ignoring the insult, that was *exactly* what he had thought. He'd only located the room in fifth year because he was desperate for a place to hide several books relating to the Chamber of Secrets after the Warren fiasco. If it had taken *him* five years, then what chance did anyone else have of finding it?

Yet, here stood Evans, who'd only been in the school for a few months.

"I'm sorry?" he responded, frowning. "How do know I've found this place – and what do you mean, Room of Requirement? It's the Room of Hidden Things. A junkyard." *Not very appropriate for a duel.*

"Your expression says it all," Evans replied, pulling open the door. "And it's not just the Room of Hidden Things."

Evans passed through the door. Tom followed, and to his surprise, he found himself in a spacious room lit with flickering torches. Large silk cushions were strewn across the floor.

Evans knew more of the room than he did, he registered dimly, but his attention was quickly caught by the bookcases that lined the walls. He strode over and picked up several books, intrigued. *A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions, The Dark Arts Outsmarted, Self-Defensive Spellwork,* their covers read.

"It transforms into whatever you request," Evans explained. "I requested the room I taught Defense in, once upon a time."

"Once upon a time,*"* Tom repeated, still a little dazed. "You're what, seventeen?"

"Eighteen," Evans corrected. "I think."

"You *think?"*

"Things happened, and I lost track." Evans waved a careless hand as if he hadn't just said possibly the most insane thing Tom had ever heard. "Anyway, I had a shoddy Defense teacher in fifth year. Shoddy doesn't even cut it, actually. She was sadistic and autocratic and delusional and – well, you can apply just about any negative adjective to her and it'll work. So, my classmates and I formed an underground Defense Association. Through no intention on my part, I became their teacher. It was fun. Until we got found out and she tried to hit me with the Cruciatus. That wasn't so fun."

"That sounds terrible," Tom replied, wondering how none of his curiosity regarding Evans was ever appeased. There was *always* something more shocking and unbelievable – and fascinating – to find out. "Where did you go before Hogwarts?"

"What, can't find that out yourself?" Evans responded, sounding amused. "You've been asking all around about me."

Tom wasn't entirely sure how Evans knew about that, but he had his guesses. It was almost certainly one of the three Longbottom relatives' faults; they were irritatingly talkative. Unfortunately, they were among the few respectable Gryffindors he *could've* talked to, though.

"Can you blame me?" he replied. "I've heard everything under the sun about you. Did you know that you've robbed Gringotts, you've broken into Azkaban, you've been expelled from Durmstrang for Dark Arts

experiments, you've been sent by Grindelwald to spy on Dumbledore, you've messed with the school brooms, you've a Charms mastery, you've flown a flying car into a Whomping Willow, you've single-handedly defeated a Chimera and you've released a Ukrainian Ridgeback from captivity? You're also Fleamont Potter's secret child and simultaneously the half-brother of Charlus Potter. Somehow. And you're a direct descendant of Merlin."

As he talked, Tom abandoned the books on their bookcase and strode to a shelf at the far end of the room, where several Dark Detecting instruments lay. To his surprise, none of them began to shiver and shriek in his presence. A blessing, he supposed; it was too early to bring Evans into awareness of his Darker interests.

Evans laughed. *Laughed.* Tom spun back around to witness it, and he found his breath caught up in his throat.

Tom usually found laughter to be raucous, unnecessary, irritating – but this wasn't like that at all. Its joy seemed to be infectious, because Tom could feel something warm and unrecognisable filling his stomach at the sound of it. At the sight of Evans' expression *finally* matching his bright eyes.

"Descendant of Merlin," Evans chortled. "Haven't heard that particular rumour before. Not sure how that would be possible, didn't think he had any children."

"He didn't," Tom replied, half-irritated that he wasn't going to get anything further out of the Gryffindor. The other half of himself remained a little breathless at the sight of a sunny smile on a sun-kissed complexion.

Evans nodded in acknowledgement, the captivating expression still on his face. "Do you want to duel now? Wandless, you suggested? No spells that cause permanent harm."

Tom blinked. "I *was* under the impression this was friendly."

Evans laughed again. "Just checking," he said. He walked several paces backwards until they were standing on opposite sides of the room, and then he shouted, *"Expelliarmus!"*

That was an incredibly strange spell to start off a wandless duel, and so out of sheer curiosity, Tom let it hit him.

It was as if a great, powerful and unyielding wave had hit him. He

was flung off his feet.

Tom found himself grinning as he summoned cushions to break his fall. He pulled himself upright. “Merlin, you’re *powerful*,” he breathed.

“I have a rather strong affinity with *Expelliarmus*,” Evans replied, sending the spell at him again. This time, Tom brought up a shield to block it. “I knocked my Potions professor out with it in third year. Among other things.”

“Do you have a penchant against all of your previous professors?” Tom asked, hurling back a *Stupefy*.

Evans dodged the scarlet bolt of light and laughed again, the sound brightening the room.

“Nah. Other way around,” he replied, and didn’t elaborate, to Tom’s great disappointment. He set back his own *Stupefy,* which Tom blocked with a shield.

They quickly settled into a rhythm, conversation intertwined with spell-casting. Although both of their repertoires were rather small – Tom’s wandless one consisted of a dozen spells, and it seemed Evans’ was roughly half that size – it was greatly enjoyable.

“Why do you always evade my spells instead of shielding?” Tom questioned a few exchanges later, casting *Impedimenta.*

Evans promptly avoided the turquoise light once more. “Shields don’t protect against all spells,” he said simply, and threw back another *Expelliarmus.* It did seem to be his favourite spell.

“If they’re weak, no. But your wandless shield seemed quite alright, when I saw it on the weekend,” Tom replied, shielding the scarlet light.

“No shield stops Unforgivables.”

“I’m not throwing Unforgivables. Just – *Petrificus Totalus!*”

Evans scrambled out of the way once again. It was an incredibly questionable movement; *Petrificus Totalus* was a spell with no light. Shielding would be a much more rational response.

“Force of habit,” Evans said.

Tom supposed he could understand that instinct. To have a professor

try to *Crucio* him... “What sort of horror story of a life have you been living?”

Evans laughed, though this time it wasn’t joyous at all. He didn’t provide any further explanation, and simply cast another spell: this one was *Confundo*.

It struck Tom, at the same time that the pink light connected with his shield, that Evans looked *incredible*. Tom thought *he* looked rather stupid when he used wandless magic, because the bolts of light materialised in thin air. Thus, he preferred to learn and perform wandless spells with no light, such as *Petrificus Totalus*.

Evans, however, was a master at moving his hands in motions that made him look like he was conjuring and manipulating lightning. He looked powerful, with his wild, fierce eyes and a determined set to his mouth. His typically dishevelled hair and askew tie added to the effect rather than detracted from it.

Tom was so distracted that he didn’t react to the green bolt of light that erupted from an upwards flick of Evans’ hand. In his defence, there had been no verbal warning; Evans used the spell wordlessly.

Tom found himself dangling upside-down, as though an invisible hook in mid-air was gripping his ankle. He blinked in shock and tilted his neck to stare at his ankles. He’d never seen a spell like this before. (He was incredibly glad he was wearing trousers with his school robes, for once in his life.)

“Oh!” Evans said, sounding delighted. “Never tried that one wandlessly before.”

Not to be discouraged by his less-than-fortunate position, Tom cried, “*Petrificus Totalus!*”

Evans was distracted by his own glee and didn’t dodge the spell. His arms and legs snapped together, and he fell over in a stiff way that was even more comical than usual, given that Tom was witnessing it upside-down.

Tom turned his attention to his ankles and said, “*Finite Incantatem.*”

To his immense displeasure, it didn’t do anything. He’d never tried the general counter-spell wandlessly before, but he was sure it wasn’t because he was incompetent. Rather, he had a feeling that whatever spell Evans had performed on him was resistant to it.

Unfortunately, the blood was rushing to his brain and making it hard for him to think of *anything* that might reverse the spell, so Tom said a little dispiritedly, “I declare stalemate. *Finite Incantatem.*”

It clearly wasn’t an issue of competence; Evans was immediately unparalysed at Tom’s utterance. He stood up and walked over with what Tom assumed was a grin plastered over his face.

“Good duel,” Evans said, and flicked his wrist.

Tom felt the invisible grip around his ankle release. He resisted the urge to yelp as he fell, as well as the urge to growl when he found himself sprawled on the floor. He also resisted the urge to complain when he realised he’d been released from the spell non-verbally and thus still had no idea what the counter was.

Evans leaned over him and offered his arm up. Tom stared at it for a second, feeling begrudging and cheated, but decided the amusement on Evans’ face was worth it. His expression was so very *alive,* so very *vibrant;* this was the Gryffindor’s real personality under his polite evenness, forced nonchalance.

“You’re so insolent,” Tom said, his tone light, and accepted the hand. Once again, Tom noted how very warm and pleasant his slightly calloused hand was. Evans hauled him up with surprising strength for his small frame, and Tom felt disappointment rush through him when the boy let go.

“Would you want to duel again sometime?” Tom suggested. “With wands, so we have a greater repertoire? That dangling spell you used is banned, though.”

“Sure,” Evans agreed, humour colouring his voice. “Are you free tomorrow night?”

“Ah, no,” Tom replied regretfully. “I’ve a supper date with Slughorn. Friday?”

“Is that a Slug Club thing?”

“No – just between myself and a few other Slytherins. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” Evans answered, though Tom noted he was frowning slightly. “Friday night’s fine with me, Riddle.”

“Tom,” Tom corrected, wondering if it was the first time since he’d arrived at Hogwarts that he’d actively invited someone to use his given name. “You may call me Tom.”

He generally hated the assumption of familiarity that came with others calling him by his first name. They knew *nothing* of him, and they never would. From that same lieu of thought, it followed that he called them by their given names because he knew everything useful of them, all their fears and hopes and dreams and secrets. No one was smart enough to work that out, however; they thought he was being *friendly*.

“Alright, Tom,” Evans said slowly. “Well, I ‘spose you can call me Harry, then.”

Maybe it wasn’t so wise to question an offered name – Tom knew *he* would certainly be annoyed – but he found himself asking, “Harry? I thought your name was Henry.”

“I was named after my great-grandfather,” the Gryffindor explained. “His name was Henry but everyone called him Harry. Apparently. I never met him.”

“You want me to call you by your great-grandfather’s nickname,” Tom replied, feeling like he was missing something. It was a constant source of ire for him, that he shared the name *Tom* with half of Britain; willing sharing a name with someone was completely outside his understanding.

“Well, if you don’t want to, no, but otherwise, yes.”

“Harry Evans,” Tom tried. Henry Evans did seem to fit better, but maybe that was just his familiarity with the latter name speaking. “Now that we’re on first name basis, does that mean you’re coming to my birthday party?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Confirmation date’s Friday.”

Tom frowned; that was not what he wanted to hear at all.

“You *are* staying over the break, aren’t you?” he questioned, wondering how he’d managed to ignore the possibility that the Gryffindor might by leaving the castle. His stomach clenched at the very idea.

“I am,” Harry replied, and internally, Tom heaved a sigh of relief. “If

you ask me on Friday, I'll give you an answer."

Tom pursed his lips, oddly feeling like he'd been rejected. Not wishing to have his mood soured any further – not when the image of Harry's smile and the sound of his laugh was still in his mind – he nodded in agreement and left the room.

*

Harry stared after Tom Riddle, gnawing his lip until it was raw.

Everything that followed the Battle of Hogwarts was a haze in his mind. Hours spent in the library of Grimmauld Place had blended together with people and places and celebrations and the occasional agreement with Kingsley and the recommissioned Aurors to pursue some of the few uncaptured Death Eaters.

It hadn't made any sense. The man who'd been trying to kill him his entire life had no longer posed any threat to him or any of his friends; he should've felt *more* alive after seeing the man's slumped, serpentine body. Instead, he'd lived his life as though his glasses were no longer working; everything had become blurred. Out-of-focus. Dull.

As much as he was eternally angry at Death for it, and as much as he missed his true friends, coming back to Hogwarts fifty years out of his time had helped him out of his daze and out of permanent indifference. The schedule of schooling, and the secret of his identity and past - it necessitated focus. Still, he hadn't felt quite *alive* again.

Until now.

Duelling Tom Riddle… it was the most *fun* he'd had in ages. Even their conversation had been easy, enjoyable. It didn't make any sense; *he* of all people should not enjoy their dialogue or interaction.

Harry sighed, fingering the spines of the Defensive books mindlessly. His thoughts on Tom Riddle were ever-conflicting. Even if the charisma was merely a façade, there was no denying that he was an exceptional student brimming with potential. Harry had already known that, through a mixture of disdainful words out of Dumbledore's mouth and memories of others, but it was another thing to bear witness to Tom Riddle's brilliance with his own eyes.

It was incredibly upsetting, actually, because he knew what would become of the man.

Tom Riddle would choose to destroy himself, and he would bring the world down with him.

Out of sheer curiosity, Harry made his way to the back shelf in the Room of Requirement and picked up the Foe Glass. There were shadowy figures in it like usual, but nothing definite. No whites of eyes, as the Junior Barty Crouch had muttered about, and nothing in the shape of Tom Riddle.

Harry wasn't sure how to interpret that, or if he should trust the functionality of the Foe Glass at all, so he placed it back down. He stared around at the Room of Requirement and allowed himself to reminisce for a few moments.

Then, before he could get homesick, he crossed the room, turned the brass doorknob, and left.

Chapter End Notes

I imagine that in between every single sentence of Tom and Harry's conversations, there are incredibly long Death Note-esque pauses. Like....

Harry: He's offering his name. Tom. What does this mean. Is he trying to butter me up to join his proto-Death Eaters? Is he offering it because he hates it and he hates me and he wants me to call him that so he'll be sent into a murderous rage? Am I sending myself to my grave if I call him 'Tom'? Or is he, for once in his life, genuinely being friendly? Nah... still... I'm curious... here goes nothing.

As always, kudos and comments are appreciated <3

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> There's depictions of ww2 (in a dream, and not graphic) and some references to war-related trauma in this chapter.
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See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were streets and streets and streets of rubble and desolate ruins before him, all lit by the ethereal glow of a full moon. The remnants had terrible, long shadows, stretching on and on, like the everlasting sirens that echoed through the night, like the screams of children and adults alike.

Majestic castles and snowy mountains and faintly whispering forests and expanses of green grasses; he knew none of that anymore. There was just long, long, long, impossibly long stretches of wreckage and passages that lead to the Underground where hundreds and hundreds and thousands and thousands lay, alive or dead or dying.

One of those deathly women reached out for him, and he realised he wasn't on the road anymore and he must've walked into the Underground. She jostled him and asked him something about cocoa and mugs, or maybe it was about where he wanted to put his bedding. He didn't hear any of it because there was a siren, one of those endlessly wailing things, and there was suddenly hundreds and hundreds of bodies toppling and there was a great stampede as people scrambled in panic. He was pushed and shoved and he fell to the floor and he was crushed underfoot and his ribs cracked and he couldn't breathe and then he was heaving great lungfuls of air and there was a little boy before him.

He was the one reaching out now, because all the edges were blurry and he wanted to ask the boy where he was, but when he grasped the boy's shoulder and turned him around, glassy eyes stared back at him. Then, the boy's skin became discoloured, and it decayed, leaving naught but a skeleton behind. He turned away, terrified at the sight, and he realised he was back on the streets.

He was on the streets and he was labouring away at the remains of a great building like he was ordered to do so but everything he touched imploded upon itself. Bits of rock turned into powder and the remnants of a wall crumbled. He crossed the street, horrified by his own hands, and there was the sound of a wailing siren in the distance. He didn't know if it was after him or if it was warning of a night raid or if it was something else entirely, but he was reaching out to touch a miraculously intact brick house.

It fell at his fingertips and he screamed because there were people emerging from the destruction he caused and their eyes were fully white. Alive or dead or dying or something else entirely, he didn't know and he didn't want to know. He wanted to escape his own screams, escape the vengeful family, escape the wailing siren, escape the life that the Germans condemned him to.

He ran and ran and ran and streets shifted into the Underground which shifted into the walls of Wool's and then back into streets and then the houses weren't in ruins but they vanished at his gaze and the entire world was crumbling around him-

Tom bolted upright, breathing heavily. His eyes moved frantically for a few seconds until he registered that there were no streets before him, no walls of Wool's, no dying women and no dead little boys. Instead, he was surrounded by green velvet curtains. He slipped a trembling hand under his pillow and withdrew his yew wand.

He conjured a glass. It had a little chip around the rim, but for once in his life, he didn't care about the imperfection. He filled it with water and promptly swallowed the contents in two great big gulps. Then, he placed it down on his bedside cabinet with a resounding *thud,* and felt a little more ready to face the day now that the dryness of his throat was alleviated.

"Temper, temper," someone in the dorm called. "Don't break something this early."

A scowl immediately fixed on Tom's face and he reevaluated. He was *not* ready to face the day whatsoever.

"Shut the fuck up," he responded, forgoing his usual dignified, eloquent responses. He was only grateful that his voice didn't shake like his hands still were.

He rubbed his eyes. Some images from his dream seem to be imprinted in his eyeballs – the *fucking family climbing out of a crumbled house.* Not wishing to see any of that, he hastily stopped his actions,

growling to himself.

“Wake up on the wrong side of bed, Tom?” the same voice asked: it was Clyde Macnair.

Oh, how he *hated* the boy. Hated his entire dormitory, in fact. Abraxas Malfoy and Randolph Lestrange and Viridian Nott and Clyde Macnair. He hated them and their pure blood and their wealth and their belief that any threats he made in the morning were baseless ones.

Tom yanked open his curtains.

“Shut the fuck up if you want to wake up tomorrow,” he said.

Clyde Macnair’s stupid thick face and stupid dim blue eyes stared at him from across the dormitory.

“Okay,” Clyde said. “I’ll shut the fuck up.”

Well, at least he was agreeable. Tom still wanted to do something to him. Something vicious. Something creative that he would think up later when it wasn’t morning and he wasn’t so tired *and his hands weren’t shaking*.

“Tom,” Abraxas said, from the bed beside Tom’s. “You look terrible. Did you not sleep well? You’ve got these terrible eyebags-”

“Randolph Corvus-Falco Lestrange, get the fuck up, your day has started,” Tom called. He grabbed his school robes from where he’d hung them over the railing at the end of his bed, stalked into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

“He definitely woke up on the wrong side of the bed,” Tom heard through the bathroom door. Clyde clearly hadn’t shut up.

Tom stared at his reflection in the mirror. He *did* look terrible; his hair was everywhere, there were dark circles under his eyes, and there was a line on his cheek where it had been pressed into the edge of his pillowcase. Damn his tendency to sleep on his side, all curled up on himself, searching for a warmth that wasn’t there. He should learn to sleep on his back like a man who wasn’t afraid of little nightmares.

He could barely remember it, now – thankfully – but the *tremor in his hands,* the fucking tremor. It remained.

Tom turned on the faucet and threw water at his face. He rubbed at it

indelicately, first with his why-won't-they-stop-trembling hands and nails and then with a scratchy towel. His face came away red but he didn't care so much because that would fade in a few minutes.

The sound of raucous laughter from within his sixth-year dorm reverberated into the bathroom.

Tom dug his nails into his palm and breathed in and out heavily, watching himself school his expression in the mirror.

Of course, they would laugh after he'd just been dreaming of the fucking war. They'd laughed when the Germans had invaded Poland. They'd laughed two days later when the United Kingdom and France declared war on Germany. They'd laughed through the entirety of third year, when London had been bombed *every single night.*

"Why the long face?" they'd said, cruel laughter on the tip of their tongues. Germany and Poland were so very far away, after all. All the way across the English channel and on the Continent. Who cared?

"You're actually concerned about what Muggles are doing?" they'd said, mockery in their voices, in their false laughs. They were able to laugh because they didn't know what a gun was, because they didn't know what a bomb was, because they thought that Muggles were stuck in the Dark Ages and would always be.

How he *hated* them. Born with silver spoons in their mouths, destined to be ignorant to the day they died. Not even when Tom brought up the possibility of Diagon Alley's wards being broken by the bombing had they been concerned.

"That won't happen, don't be stupid – oh, I forgot, you can't help it," they'd said, jeering.

Tom gritted his teeth. *Mudblood,* they'd called him thousands and thousands of times over. *The mudblood's sulking because he's got mudblood problems.* Not being given permission to stay at Hogwarts over the summer because the *entire world* was at war was a mudblood problem.

How he *despised* them all.

How he envied them all, too.

Blissfully ignorant. Spoiled rotten. Heads thick, fattened by undeserved praise for years on end. How simple it must be. How

peaceful it must be, for their dreams to not be invaded by screams and sirens and rubble and Merlin-God-Christ knows what else.

Tom released his iron grip on the edge of the sink. After taking one last deep breath to reassure himself, he turned away from the mirror and prepared himself for a shower.

He turned the heat all the way up because he'd read or heard somewhere that it was supposed to be cleansing. It was a total lie, because he only walked out of the shower more irritated than before.

He couldn't care less that he spent the next fifteen minutes hogging the bathroom, fine-tuning his appearance. A glamour for the ridiculous dark circles beneath his eyes. A few charms to dry, comb, and fix his hair in place. Another charm to stop his skin from shining red, courtesy of the scalding shower. The line on his cheek had thankfully vanished so he needn't worry about that.

Finally, he made sure both his Prefect badge and his green tie sat straight on his school robes.

When he was done, he grimaced in the mirror. Not at himself, but rather at the sound of boisterous *something* that was going on in the dormitory. He'd been well and truly woken up by the raging hot water, but it was still too early to deal with their nonsense. Unfortunately however, he couldn't stay in the bathroom all day.

After he assured himself that he was more than capable of restraining himself from murdering a collection of brainless idiots, spineless cowards and callous bigots on sight, he re-entered his sixth-year dormitory.

Abraxas and Randolph were throwing pillows at each other.

Tom honestly didn't know whether that was better or worse than cursing each other into the hospital wing.

Thankfully, they stopped upon seeing him, guilt and anxiety writing itself all over their stupid faces. Good – at least that meant he'd succeeded in appearing intimidatingly impeccable once again.

"Whatever you do, don't be late to class," was all that Tom could find it in himself to say. He stalked out of the dorm, the meek words of '*yes, Tom*' and '*yes, my Lord*' following him.

At the Slytherin table, he stared into the depths of his black coffee for

an entire minute before he finally deciding to complete it with a teaspoon of sugar. He swirled the spoon around in his mug wandlessly, and pointedly ignored the admiring looks of his peers and their pathetic attempts at conversation.

He lifted the mug up to his mouth, and as he did so that Muggle woman from his dream appeared his mind. Dirty, dirty hair, filthy, filthy hands reaching out, asking about cocoa or bedding or *something-*

Tom hastily placed his coffee back down on the table. With a *thud.*

"Don't feel like coffee today," he said, because half of Slytherin table was looking at him, nervous creases in their brows. "I'll have a teacup, Viridian."

He wasn't really fond of tea, but at least the teacup didn't remind him of his dream. Of the war. Of the dead and the dying.

Merlin. God. Christ. He hated his own thoughts. This *weakness* within him. He was *immortal* – nothing the Germans did would remove him from the face of the Earth. Why was he still *haunted by them?*

Once he'd drained the teacup, he stared at the dregs of tea as if he were in Divination Class. Despite having achieved an 'Outstanding' in his OWLs, he didn't really believe in divining the future – especially not through *tea.* At least Arithmancy took an analytical approach and made sense. Still, the idea of the future being entirely out of his control was terrifying; enough of his life had already been controlled by outside forces.

There was a vertical deposit of dregs in his cup, and it was surrounded by disordered, small dots of tea. The line could represent a journey – it wasn't thick enough to represent a chain – and the dots could represent a flurry of activity. One of the dots, however, was far larger and situated right above the line, so it could represent a candle instead. New ideas; enlightenment.

"Viridian," Tom said, pushing the teacup under his dormmate's nose. "What do you see?"

The weedy boy looked down at the teacup and then back at him. "I don't take NEWT Divination," Viridian said slowly.

"Neither do *I*," Tom replied, clamping down on the irritation spreading within him. "We did basic tessomancy in third year and revised it for OWLs. What do you see?"

“Um.” Viridian took the cup from his hands. “Well. I suppose there’s an arrow. Forgot what that means. I only scraped an ‘Acceptable’ on my OWLs.” He looked up. “It’s pointing towards the Gryffindor table. At what’s-his-name.”

“An *arrow?*” Tom repeated. “It’s clearly a candle. Do you need your eyes checked?”

Tom took the teacup back, turned it around and squinted, only to realise that there was an arrow of dregs in the teacup now. Passing the thing between their hands had clearly changed the shape of the tea leaf blobs.

He *hated* Divination. Useless subjective class.

“And now it’s pointing at Slughorn,” Viridian said.

“You *imbecile*, that’s because I turned the-”

Tom stopped himself, wondering how it had taken him *this long* to realise what day it was. It was Thursday – the second-last day of classes before the winter break. The day all his plans came together.

Bloody fucking Germans, he thought. Occupying his brain and slowing it.

He stared into his teacup with a renewed appreciation for divination. The tea leaves *had clearly been* a candle, and now they depicted an arrow pointing at Slughorn. That surely meant he was going to be learning something from the man tonight.

“What do you reckon mine says?” Viridian asked, turning his own teacup around and around. “I think that’s a heart. Do you think that means Priscilla likes me?”

The good news in his tea leaves had put him in a rare benevolent mood. Tom patted the boy’s shoulder and said, “I think so. Why don’t you ask Miss Parkinson out now? She’s entering the Great Hall.”

A smile lit up Viridian’s narrow face and his attention was immediately drawn to the door. “I think I will,” he said happily, getting up from his seat.

Tom couldn’t even find it himself to be disgusted by his Knight’s display of young, foolish love. He reached out for some toast, surprising the Slytherins around him; he typically only had black

coffee at breakfast.

“I’m seizing the day,” Tom explained.

“…with toast?”

Tom turned his head slowly until he met Clyde’s gaze, diagonally across from him. The burly boy blinked back at him, owlishly.

“Didn’t I tell you to shut the fuck up?”

“…yes, my Lord. I’ll be right on it.”

Fortunately, not even Clyde’s insolence could put a dampener on his mood. *Nothing* could. Today was the day that *months* of planning came together – and it would go swimmingly, if his teacup were correct.

The world seemed out to test his resolve, unfortunately. Half an hour later, Abraxas and Randolph showed up late to Potions. This *did* dampen his mood, especially since Randolph came without his essay. Not only did they make themselves and Slytherin House look bad, but Tom too, since he was their Prefect.

However, he had collected himself before the end of Potions and decided that it was merely a hiccup in his day, just like the early morning had been. He was too smart to let something insignificant upset his mood and thus his chance with Slughorn.

That decision seemed to satisfy the testy world, because everything quickly looked up again.

On the way to Ancient Runes, he passed Evans – *Harry* – in the corridors. Although they were both surrounded by people – Tom by his sixth-year Knights and Harry by a gaggle of seventh-year Gryffindors – they made eye-contact, waved to each other and let out a ‘hello’. Both of their parties sent curious looks their way, but Tom couldn’t care less for the interhouse rivalries. Their acquaintance was unusual, defying the odds even, and Tom quite liked how thrilling that sounded.

In both his Ancient Runes and the following Charms class, he received back his latest essays. 'Outstanding', they both read, as they always did. Still, it was validating to receive the marks, and they added to his good mood.

Care of Magical Creatures after lunch passed smoothly, which was surprising. Professor Kettleburn had very little care for safety precautions; it was a weekly occurrence for someone in his classes to end up under Madam Calderon's care with second-degree burns or some other injury. Of course, Tom was exceedingly intelligent, and thus had only been injured in Kettleburn's classes once - an incident from fifth year that he was still annoyed about. (It had been a *hippogriff's* fault, of course. 'Proud creatures' – what about *his* pride? He bowed to nothing and no one, and especially not some ridiculous eagle-horse hybrid.) Regardless, the lack of injury from anyone was no small miracle, particularly since clumsy and senseless Abraxas took the class.

On the way back to the castle from Care, he stumbled across Harry once more. He was coming from the Greenhouses, so he must've had Herbology. Tom took note of that, for future purposes.

This time, they were accompanied by less people; Harry by Prewett and the Jasmine girl, Tom by Abraxas (unfortunately) and Clyde (also unfortunately. Clyde did not seem to realise that 'shut up' had been a permanent order). Seizing his chance, Tom caught up to the Gryffindor with quick, long strides, and called out a '*hello*'.

Harry turned around, a smile on his face. It was small, but what it lacked in size it was made up for the general radiance of his presence. He looked quite stunning, standing in the mid-afternoon sun with his tanned skin and green eyes.

"Tom," Harry greeted. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were following me."

"I follow no one," Tom informed him. Both Clyde and Abraxas tensed beside him and exchanged an excessively worried glance. Thankfully, Harry wasn't as tightly-strung as they were, and he let out a laugh.

"No, I don't imagine you do," the Gryffindor replied easily, and gazed into the distance, to the paddock that Tom had come from. Kettleburn was still there, wrestling with the hopping, fire-breathing half-breed creatures that they'd had the misfortune of dealing with that day. "I

don't take NEWT Care – are his classes really as deadly as what everyone says they are?"

That was how they ended up walking side-by-side back to the castle. Harry's Gryffindor acquaintances seemed to handle themselves just fine, but Abraxas and Clyde stumbled along behind them. It was pitiful that they needed his constant direction, so of course he decided to ignore them. His attention was reserved for Harry, who'd begun to detail his own experience of hippogriffs, in response to Tom's very, very brief recount.

Tom pictured Harry bowing to him as the boy spoke. It was a pleasing – no, exhilarating – thought.

That mental image – and the memory of Harry grinning at himself, hands motioning in the air theatrically to demonstrate flying on a hippogriff – remained in his mind the rest of the day. When he entered Slughorn's office after dinner that night, alongside Randolph and seventh-years Jerome Rosier, Dominic Mulciber and Alphonse Avery, he was in a mood so cheerful that he felt prepared to take on the world. His mind was sharp, and his tea leaves were on his side. On the contrary, Slughorn already looked relaxed and reckless with his glass of wine and winged armchair and velvet pouffe. Tom knew that the game of subtle manipulation was all but won already.

There was still work to put in, however. For all that Tom believed Slughorn to embody the deadly sin of gluttony – or possibly even greed – he had to admit that the man was quite clever.

He was a puppeteer, in a way. He could pick out talent and wealth and power very easily, and he was very good at making those he chose to feel special. He provided them with connections or praise or motivation and could string entire careers along with the network he'd made. He essentially bought loyalty, bought a promise to be a favourite professor, and in return – many years later – he would get something out of it. More connections. Confectionary. Tickets to all sorts of events. A good word for himself. It was an incredibly effective method.

Despite this, Tom had no problems whatsoever influencing him. Slughorn believed everyone played the same game of manipulation as him, because he had grown lazy and complacent with his success.

All it took was a box of crystallised pineapple, courtesy of Deimos Carrow, to put Slughorn in a cheerful, impressionable mood.

Slughorn ate up his flattery even though the professor was aware of it; he simply thought Tom wanted the Minister position, and that ambition made Tom such a *good prize.* The man yearned to say that he had taught the Minister, to say that he was the Minister's favourite professor, to receive hampers from the Minister himself.

It was amusing, actually. The Potions professor praised his ambitions and his intelligence so much that he did Tom's job for him. By the time their supper gathering was dismissed at eleven o'clock, Slughorn had practically made *himself* amenable to Tom's whims.

It only took a little more careful flattery, a casual tone, and occasional hesitancy to get Slughorn to talk on horcruxes. After all, Tom had successfully sculpted Slughorn's mind into accepting that he knew things he shouldn't – one mention of the secret of Merrythought's impending retirement during the supper had done that. Because *that* knowledge had been harmless, Slughorn was more willing to believe that indulging his curiosity a little was also harmless.

Slughorn bought into his façade until right at the end, when Tom reached the actual point of his questioning. *Wouldn't it be better to have your soul in seven pieces, for isn't seven the most magically powerful number?*

That was the least scholarly question, far more dangerous and personal – and Slughorn realised it, too. His expression was deeply troubled, but it was too late for him to back out of the conversation; he was a fly caught in a spider's web, a marionette whose strings Tom controlled.

"Seven!" Slughorn exclaimed in response. "Isn't it bad enough to think of killing one person? And in any case, it's bad enough to divide the soul, but to rip it into seven pieces..."

The response didn't directly answer his question but the horror was sufficient enough: Slughorn *did* believe it possible to have a soul in seven pieces.

"All academic," Tom assured the professor as he left the office. It mattered not whether or not Slughorn accepted that as truth; it was too late, for Tom had gotten everything he wanted from the conversation. Better yet, Tom knew shame led to secrecy, and it was extremely evident that Slughorn was ashamed of entering the conversation at all. He would likely take the conversation to his grave.

It truly could not have gone better. Tom could not have wiped the

smile from his expression if he tried, nor could he have hidden the giddiness from his eyes. He had already overcome the mortality that the Germans had made him terrifyingly aware of, but now he had confirmation he could go beyond that, become truly unbeholden to mortal laws.

A soul of *seven,* how powerful that would be; how infallible he would be. Neither the Germans nor anyone else would be able to touch him – Wizardkind would have nothing on him. His head dizzy with the knowledge of what heights awaited him, he crossed the corridor with a slight skip in his step and turned right.

He walked right into someone.

"Ten points from-" he began automatically, reverting to his role of Prefect because it was after curfew. He looked down at the tie – red – and opened his mouth to complete the sentence.

"Don't. Don't make more horcruxes, Tom."

It was as if someone had tied a rope around his chest and yanked *hard,* because Tom suddenly came out of his thoughts and into awareness, his heart pounding and his lungs heaving. His words died on the tip of his tongue and he stared into the face before him – into the aesthetically pleasing face of Harry Evans.

"You heard Slughorn. Splitting the soul is a violation of one of the fundamental, most intrinsic parts of oneself. An act against nature. You think that isn't without consequence?"

Dozens of thoughts filtered in and out of Tom's head in a split second. *No point denying it, he must've heard the conversation, of course he knows what a horcrux is, he read the goddammed book, but oh, he knows – but Slughorn also knows – but he knows precisely, he's too knowing, he said 'more', and he's not ashamed, not beholden to secrecy, he goddammed knows-*

Tom breathed in and out, and stared into ever-expressive, brilliant green eyes. Facts filtered through his mind first: Harry knew he had a horcrux. Harry did not think horcruxes were a good idea.

Something tugged at his heartstrings.

Betrayal.

He'd believed, foolishly, that Harry had similar ideas to him because

he'd read the same book. That was clearly not the case, and he felt cheated.

It was an awful, awful feeling. Betrayal: it implied that he'd cared about Harry and his opinion in the first place. He'd striven all his life to be independent, to trust and rely on no one, and only now was he realising that he'd failed. Harry had woven his way into Tom's good opinion and now he felt *betrayed.*

"How do you know?" Tom asked. It came out as a demand, though he wasn't sure if he was demanding *how do you know of my horcrux?* or *how do you know of the consequences?*

"Because I've met a wizard who had multiple horcruxes," Harry responded. "I'll tell you the story, if you have patience for it. But know this: his mind was fractured. I *saw* his thoughts. They were all half-finished fragments, strung together by anger. All rationality had escaped him."

Harry's shoulders were relaxed as he spoke so freely and directly about the Dark topic, and suddenly Tom understand part of the awfully improper conversation he'd heard between those Gryffindor girls. *Masculine confidence…*

"You're lying," Tom replied, because while he understood what the use of past tense implied, the declaration was all a fantastical tale. "Nobody's made more than one horcrux."

"Lying, am I?" Harry said, and he shoved his right hand under Tom's face. Faint but certainly there, was the white scarring that resulted from excessive use of a Blood Quill. *I must not tell lies,* it read.

"You know how I got that?" Harry continued. His tone was icy. "I told the *truth.* But the truth's hard to swallow, isn't it? Better to content yourself with lies because they don't challenge the comfort of your preconceived notions, right?"

Salazar.

Harry was so incredibly *fierce.* There was such conviction in his voice, so much *commanding* in his stance – there was *so much fire in his eyes. Merlin, God, Christ* – Tom wanted add fuel to the fire, cultivate it, and douse and destroy it all at once.

"Inform me of your truth, then," he demanded, the sting of perceived betrayal driving his biting words. "Consequences. What

consequences?"

"Not *my* truth, Tom," Harry said, infuriatingly calmly. "*The* truth. Get it out of your head that whatever I've got to say is wrong simply because it challenges you."

Tom flexed his fingers, irritation growing within him.

"*Speak*," he ordered.

Harry spoke, but Tom just *knew* it wasn't because he was responding to the order. He spoke on his own accord, because Tom did not have him under his control.

And Tom… Tom wondered if he ever would. A small fire could be controlled, but forest fires were an unstoppable force of nature – and Harry's eyes were too bright and too intense for it to be any easily doused fire.

"The first Fundamental Law of Magic – I'm sure you're familiar with it – states that the deeper somebody goes meddling with the underlying laws of magic, the more drastic and terrible the subsequent consequences are. Souls are so intrinsic, so fundamental; the consequence of splitting one are terrible. Slughorn told you of one of them. If you were to be ripped from your body, no, you wouldn't truly die, but you would be next to nothing. Less than a spirit, less than a ghost. A wraith."

Yes, he had heard Slughorn. *Existence in such a form… few would want it, Tom,* the straw-haired man had said, gazing downwards like a coward, displaying the shining bald spot on his head.

It certainly wasn't a desirable existence – but it was certainly better than *death.*

"That's a temporary issue," Tom argued. "There is possession. There are enchantments to restore wraiths into rudimentary physical bodies. There are resurrection rituals."

"Yes, I'm aware," Harry said placidly. *So infuriatingly placidly.* "But think. Complete solitary confinement destroys the sanity of most people within days. To be a wraith, unable to interact with anyone or anything for possibly *years* on end – Gods, the psychological harm that would do to anyone."

"You said this supposed wizard's mind was fractured. He was a

wraith?"

"For thirteen years."

"There you have it," Tom said triumphantly. "Your logic fails you. It wasn't the horcruxes; it was the thirteen years of being a wraith."

"And one follows from the other."

"Not if you don't die – or, nearly."

"You think yourself infallible?"

The words hit Tom like a freight train. Crushed him, as though he were truly part of the stampede in Bethnal Green station.

Because that was the crux of the matter, wasn't it? He *wasn't* infallible, and the Germans had made sure to remind him of that every single night of his goddammed existence. *Sirens, sirens, sirens,* all telling him that he might die like a goddammed Muggle to a goddammed bomb without ever achieving anything in his goddammed life. His existence would be forgotten within a matter of months – he'd be an insignificant little nobody who left not a mark in history even though he was greatest wizard of his age and on the path to become the greatest wizard of all time.

Even now that he had a horcrux, his stupid body was still mortal, was still fallible, and would always be – it was just the soul that was immortal.

At least, now, he would have the chance to reconvene, even if it took years, decades, *centuries* – but it was still unideal and his worst fear was his own slumped body, after all.

They stared at each other. Harry's stupidly bright eyes had blown wide, *too goddammed knowing*. Tom could not find it in himself to form an answer, and it seemed Harry was too much of a self-righteous *bastard* to admit to his wrongdoing, to his trespassing of Tom's privacy – of his deepest fear.

Their silence was eventually broken by none other than Slughorn.

"Ah, I thought I heard a sound. Boys, it's far after curfew…" he said, and then he evidently noticed that Tom was one of the 'boys', because the same troubled expression from earlier wrote itself across his face.

“Indeed, sir,” Tom answered. “I was just escorting Evans back his Common Room, he seems to have lost his way. Being new and all.”

Slughorn looked between the two of them. As Tom had anticipated, he accepted that explanation without question because he was a coward and it was the way out of a confrontation.

“Best be quick then, at this hour…”

Tom stared after him as he hurriedly left the corridor and presumably returned to his office, as did Harry. It was reminiscent of a few days prior, when they’d stared after Merrythought – only this time it was all-too-evident that there was no solidarity in the mutual gesture.

Harry was the *complete opposite* of him. If Tom wasn’t incorrect – and he rarely, if ever, was – then he had killed an immortal man. Tom, on the other hand, planned to use his kills to further his anchor to immortality.

Paranoia threatened to wreak havoc in his veins.

“Do you plan to kill me?” he demanded.

“No,” Harry said. The response came immediately, without thought, so Tom could believe it was the truth. “I’m *trying* telling you what I know because you are brilliant, Tom Riddle, and I don’t want you to make his mistakes.”

The *insolence,* the *impudence,* the *impertinence;* Harry had it in spades and buckets. He was even more presumptuous than Dumbledore, who had walked into Tom’s room at Wool’s and had already made up his mind about what sort of character he would find.

“*Mistakes*,” Tom retorted, spitefully. Harry flinched at the sound, and a small part of himself took joy in finding that the boy’s confidence was *not* unshakable. “Bold words from someone who won’t even name they wizard they speak of. All fantastical, I’d wager. I won’t undignify myself by furthering this conversation.”

Tom pushed past the boy and continued down the corridor, *betrayal* still tugging his heartstrings. Harry was a *fool* to think that immortality was a mistake when the world was broken and uncaring and the sirens wailed every goddammed night.

“I hadn’t finished,” Harry said behind him, raising his voice as Tom became more distant from him. “And you *do* believe me – the truth is

just very hard to swallow, isn't it?"

The *insolence* of it all. The 'truth' – as if it weren't all subjective, as this nameless wizard's instability hadn't been solely caused by thirteen years as a wraith, as if there weren't potions and rituals to boost strength and brainpower and memory and reinforce rationality. He wasn't *stupid* – how dare Harry imply that he was.

He wanted to stamp every ounce of boldness out of the boy. Tom wanted to leave him breathless and shaking for being so *audacious,* so, so- Merlin, God, Christ – he *wanted-*

He wanted to go sleep and forget that Harry existed. Or maybe he wanted to go to the *Room of Requirement,* which would be incredibly useful now that he actually knew what it was.

He wanted to *spite* the boy.

Chapter End Notes

Well. I hope you enjoyed this update... ;)

Comments and kudos are appreciated <3

Chapter 5

Tom shivered within the Slytherin dormitory. It was Saturday, the first day of the holidays. Even for winter and a morning in the dungeons of Hogwarts, it was bizarrely cold. All of Friday had been bizarrely cold, too.

It had been unusually cool for the last several months, now that he thought about it. Even the summer back in Wool's hadn't been as stiflingly hot as it typically was.

Tom pulled a jumper over his head, though that didn't resolve the issue much. He shivered again as he walked out of the Slytherin quart of the castle and headed for the Great Hall. A good cup of scalding hot black coffee would probably warm him up.

A couple of minutes later, he stopped abruptly.

Henry Evans was standing in the corridor he'd turned into. *Again.* He was leaning against a wall, his inky black hair a complete disaster as usual. There was a piece of parchment in his hand, for some reason.

"Tom Riddle," the boy said, pocketing the parchment and standing up straighter. His behaviour indicated that he'd expected Tom to turn that corridor. As if he'd been *waiting.*

Tom resisted the urge to growl. He was *irritating.* He was impossible to find when Tom searched for him and then impossible to escape when Tom didn't want to talk to him.

"Let's not beat around the bush," Harry continued. "You didn't show up to our duel yesterday. Out of good faith, I'll presume it was because you were too busy with Slytherin end-of-term celebrations and it had nothing to do with you hoping to avoid our unfinished conversation."

There was no correct way to respond to a statement like that. Tom ground his teeth, only to find that they chattered instead. *It was so cold.*

Harry wasn't even wearing a jumper, Tom noted resentfully. The only item of winter clothing he wore was a red-and-yellow scarf, and he hadn't even done it up properly. It hung loose around his neck.

Tom remembered how warm the boy's hands had been, the two times he had grasped them. The Gryffindor was probably one of those people that always ran hot. Bitter for not having the same luck in life, he settled on replying scornfully.

"You do seem to love *presuming*."

Unlike one-and-a-half days prior, Harry didn't react to the spitefulness in his words. As if he'd gotten used to it – as if he'd expected it. As if he'd reassessed whatever plans rolled around his head and reconvened.

That would be concerning, had Tom not already beaten and spited the boy. Had he already not risen to new heights.

"I'll *presume*, that since it's the weekend and the holidays, you have nowhere to be," Harry continued.

"Actually, I was walking to breakfast, and then I'd planned to say my goodbyes to my friends that are leaving with the train."

Harry raised an eyebrow, doubtfully. "I won't take too much of your time up."

Tom grimaced; he hadn't accounted for the boy's tenacity, when he should've. It was practically in every Gryffindor's blood.

He sighed for effect. Sometimes, the best way to deal with tenacity was to indulge them. Allow them to think that they'd gotten their way. It was at no cost to him – he had already gotten his way. In fact, maintaining a pretence of agreeance would be beneficial. Having Harry as an enemy would be dangerous, given his implied history.

"Alright," Tom said. It seemed Harry was intelligent enough to recognise that his agreeance *was* unlikely, because shock momentarily wrote itself over the Gryffindor's face. However, a sunny smile quickly replaced that expression.

One thing learnt about Harry, Tom internally noted. *He likes to give people the benefit of the doubt.* That was an extremely exploitable weakness, so Tom had no problem matching the smile.

Harry's smile slipped. Tom involuntarily shivered, unsure if it were because of the general chilly air or the lack of warmth on the Gryffindor's face, as compared with his previous expression.

Another thing noted: Harry was suspicious of him. That was unsurprising, given that the boy had overhead his conversation with Slughorn and apparently held a disappointingly different viewpoint. His suspicion was unfortunate, and would prove immensely annoying to work around, but it was not an insurmountable problem. He was good at acting; he could charm the boy into thinking that he'd gotten his way and coerce him into impartiality.

Internally, Tom frowned at himself. If he successfully played Harry – why stop at impartiality? He was powerful, intelligent, confident and capable. His *stupid, baseless feelings of betrayal* would make a fool of him, if he were to throw away the allegiance of someone so valuable just because their ideas on one topic conflicted.

After a short exchange, they agreed to move the conversation into the nearest classroom. It would remain unused even as the day wore on as it was now the holidays, but Tom cast an Imperturbable Charm on the door regardless. He was not taking any more chances.

Harry's eyes followed the motion of his wand, and only when Tom pocketed it did the boy look up to meet his gaze once again.

"You hadn't finished telling me about the consequences of invoking the first Fundamental Law of Magic," Tom prompted.

Harry frowned at him, evidently suspicious of his apparent eagerness.

Intelligent, Tom reminded himself. It wouldn't do to think of Harry as someone with Abraxas' level of perceptiveness; that would be asking for trouble.

"No, I hadn't," Harry confirmed after a second. "All consequences of horcruxes are quite ironic. The first, that Slughorn brought up; you remain alive upon death of your physical body, but only *just.* The second; you get your wish, that you don't pass onto the afterlife. *Cannot* pass on. What remains of the torn soul, upon the destruction of all horcruxes and the main soul fragment's body, will be sent to Limbo. The In-Between. Purgatory. Whatever you wish to name it. There, the remaining soul will feel the mutilated state of itself every single second until the end of eternity. Constant pain will put it into a state of delirium. It is beyond help."

Harry was leaning against one of the desks, his hands placed behind him for balance. It was a careless stance of someone at complete ease,

and Tom could hardly comprehend the dichotomy between it and the Gryffindor's words.

He swallowed. *Feeling the mutilated state of itself;* that was rather like how creating a horcrux felt. Harry had been right to call the soul fundamental on Thursday – tearing it caused agonising pain to every single aspect of self. It was a torment of the body, a torture of the mind and an exhaustion of the magic within him. To feel that for all eternity… it *did* sound horrific.

It was also a fate that didn't await him. He had no intention of letting his horcruxes be destroyed, nor of having his body killed.

Harry continued speaking before Tom could decide on the best response.

"The third and last consequence that I've observed is again, ironic, and it's also probably the only one you'll care about," he said, presumptuously. "The body and mind reflect the soul. The wizard I'm referring to was a shell of himself far before he was a wraith. That was before my birth, mostly, so I can't give you particularly accurate descriptions, but what I *can* tell you that murder had already become synonymous with power in his mind. Anyone who stood up to him died. He had lost all rationality; he believed I was a threat to him when I was *one year old*. He attempted to murder me then. When I was a *baby*. Don't tell me you can rationalise that."

Tom blinked. That was not what he'd expected to hear whatsoever, and quite frankly, it was troubling.

He stared at the Gryffindor. The boy seemed to be constantly *bursting* with life, as if the vitality could not physically be contained within him. The fire burning fiercely behind his eyes, the glow of his bronzed skin, the windswept or electric standing of his hair; it was so far removed from the pale skin and dull watery blue eyes and excessively-gelled hair that stared at him from within the inbred pureblood circles he associated with.

It was horrifying to think that Harry's vibrant eyes might've turned glassy at the age of *one*. That his skin might've been cold and pale in death, all because of a man with horcruxes, plural.

Tom didn't want to think about the parallels that he could draw to himself there. He could not bear the thought of seeing glassy green eyes, and that was an important difference.

Harry laughed, dryly. “It’s on your face,” he said. “Say it out loud.”

Tom wanted to call him *so presumptuous, so arrogant,* but in reality, Harry was simply *correct*. Correct and unwaveringly confident in his assertions. *Murdering a one-year-old;* there was nothing rational about that.

“You don’t know that the horcruxes had anything to do with his irrationality*,* if you weren’t born then,” Tom pointed out, eventually. “Some people are just born with little capability for sense.”

The Gaunts, for instance. So inbred, so uneducated. They were deluded to the point of thinking their grime was royalty. They were not the grand lineage worthy of Salazar Slytherin that he’d thought he’d found whatsoever.

“I do know,” Harry responded. “Perhaps he lacked empathy, perhaps he was greatly troubled, but I know he was once capable of rationality.”

“If you say so,” Tom said, placidly. It was the most agreeable response that didn’t make him admit to having second thoughts and potentially being wrong.

Harry raised his eyebrows as if knowing exactly he was thinking. Thankfully, he chose not to comment, and merely continued on.

“He murdered my parents, that night he tried to kill me. They’re just two of the victims from before his years as a wraith. During his years as a wraith – well, it was probably when he was a homunculus – he created another horcrux. I’m sure that didn’t help his already-struggling rationality and soundness of mind. As for after his resurrection… I’ll just list *some* of the people whose loss of livelihood he’s directly or indirectly responsible for. My godfather. My pseudo-uncle and his wife. My mentor. My potions professor. Several of my friends and peers. One of which who was murdered for no reason other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. ‘The spare’, he was called.”

Harry’s face crumpled. Tom watched, unsure of what to do. Unsure of *himself*. He shivered, involuntarily. The air was cold and self-doubt had struck a chord within his icy heart.

It was shocking, to observe someone so confident and unshakeable *be shaken.* It was *staggering,* to see the imprint that a man who’d had multiple horcruxes had left upon someone as fierce as Harry.

He watched as Harry schooled his expression and the determined set of his mouth returned.

“You treasure your mind. Don’t lose it by continuing to split your soul, Tom,” Harry said.

Tom swallowed, saliva thick at the back of his throat.

He had agreed to this conversation as a farce. He had not expected to be genuinely moved by what Harry had to say. It wasn’t just hard, cold, textbook facts; the Gryffindor was speaking from his actual experiences. There had been real grief, real trauma on his face.

The boy was *bad news;* no one was supposed to succeed in influencing him. No one was supposed to make him feel betrayed, either. Yet, he was possibly very good news, too; Tom wanted to be powerful, not deluded and irrational.

Tom hesitated, wondering if it was appropriate, decided he didn’t care because the *betrayal* he felt at realising their differing ideas still stung, and then said, “You didn’t mention this wizard’s magical ability.”

Harry pursed his lips. Very slowly, he responded, “His magical ability was nigh unparalleled, but I wouldn’t credit that to horcruxes. He was naturally powerful. He underwent a lot of Dark rituals, too, but I suspect they fucked with his mind and body as much as, if not more than they improved his magical capacity. I don’t know the specifics.”

“Right,” Tom said. *Because your specialty is destroying horcruxes and killing immortal men*, he didn’t add. It felt unwise to remind.

Harry hesitated. “Splitting the soul is an exponential thing, I’m sure you’ve realised. One half of your soul remains, then a quarter, then an eighth, and so on, until only a tiny fragment of yourself remains. Will you ever wonder what you left behind? Or will you look upon an ember and still believe it to be the bonfire that it once was?”

Tom stared. The air was still currently *so cold;* that analogy felt more targeted than he was sure had been intended.

He frowned at himself, and dismissed his half-formed thoughts to the back of his mind.

Eventually, he let out, “I’ve never read anything to confirm the last two consequences of horcruxes that you stated. I’ll do more research.”

It wasn't a lie. His mind was what had gotten him through eleven hard years in an orphanage, through four hard years at Hogwarts. It was what had allowed him to ascend the hierarchy of Slytherin House. He hated being wrong, but he'd much rather swallow his pride and know he could trust the only weapon he'd had for so long.

"I don't think you'll find much – we're both aware there's not much to find on soul magic," Harry replied, biting his lip. "I'm speaking almost entirely from my own unique experiences. You don't have to believe all of it, but think about what I've said. You're intelligent. Don't do anything rash. Please."

Tom suddenly couldn't look at him. The familiar chill raced through him again, as if to mock him for cowardice and potential stupidity, and he hated it immeasurably.

"I'm going to breakfast."

Harry looked like he wanted to go on another spiel, but the only thing he let out was, "Enjoy your breakfast, then."

He sounded dejected.

The bitter cold that clung to the winter air and rattled his bones, the conflicting, troubled thoughts that flew around in his mind, the way that uncertainty and disagreement hung between them; it was all too much. Tom hurried out of the classroom, desperate to escape.

He sat down at the Slytherin table and made himself a scalding hot black coffee, in a teacup. Most of his table was absent, as people were too busy doing last-minute packing for the holidays. Or recovering from the previous night's celebrations.

Tom sipped on his coffee, and relished at the ever-so-slight comforting warmth that spread within him.

"Morning, Tom."

Tom scowled at the sound of Abraxas' voice, and as he did so, he realised one very important thing: Harry and Abraxas were both irritating. However, Tom felt no particular way towards Abraxas; the boy was just irritating and made him irritable.

Harry, on the other hand? Tom was fascinated by him even when he was irritated at him.

It didn't even make *sense.* The boy had *betrayed him.* Tom had only taken an interest in him because he'd thought they shared similar ideas, and now it was evident that his faith was misplaced.

It hardly mattered, where his initial interest stemmed from, though. A shared reading of *The Secrets of The Darkest Arts* had long since stopped being sole source of fascination with the Gryffindor. He'd become captivated by the boy in so many ways: by his magical prowess, his mind, by the mystery of his history, by the way he spoke with conviction and the way he wove stories, by his brilliant green eyes, by the artful mess of his hair and the round frames of his glasses and the always-askew red tie.

Tom cleared his throat, a little concerned with the detail of his thoughts.

"Where's Randolph?" he asked.

"Still in the dormitory. Hungover," Abraxas answered. "I might've stolen his Invigoration Draught."

Tom groaned at the reminder of the previous night. He'd had absolutely no fun at the end-of-term celebration in the Slytherin Common Room. As much as he enjoyed lording over his pure-blooded housemates, being a prefect was an utter bore, sometimes. *You can't play that song on the gramophone because it's inappropriate, I'll be confiscating that bottle of Firewhiskey, no duelling in the Common Room, no releasing fireworks in the Common Room, that product is on the list of banned items within Hogwarts' walls.*

Two hours into the quote unquote *celebration*, he'd seen some of his older Knights sneak out. When he'd finally had the opportunity to leave and track them down, he'd found them in a nearby unused classroom, singing over a bottle of Firewhiskey.

"I do hope you weren't the one to supply the Firewhiskey," Tom said, swallowing a scalding mouthful of black coffee. He needed caffeine *immediately,* if he was being forced to interact with the blonde-haired *imbecile.* Randolph was getting throttled later – how hard could it be, to prevent Abraxas from thieving? "If you were, I *will* crucify you."

Abraxas was probably still drunk, or maybe he still held onto the foolish belief that Tom's threats were null in the morning, or maybe he didn't even know what 'crucify' meant, because he replied far too cheerfully.

“It wasn’t me, but don’t worry, we were being responsible, taking it away from the minors in the Common Room – like yourself!”

Tom resisted the urge to bash Abraxas’ head into the Slytherin table. Or even his own. A concussion would less painful than this conversation.

“I’m less than two weeks off majority – and at any rate, *I* am the responsible one deserving of adulthood, breaking your nonsense up. What if Slughorn walked past? Or worse, *Dumbledore*.”

“Well, it didn’t happen, did it?” Abraxas shrugged, shoving a sausage in his mouth. “Come on, it’s holidays now, don’t be a depressed Demetrius – oh, and you reminded me…”

Tom stared, dumbfounded, as Abraxas began to overturn his pockets. A couple of Galleons clanged on the table, a quill was dumped dangerously close to his half-eaten sausage, a musty old spoon joined his plate, a packet of Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum was accidentally dropped on the floor, and several Chocolate Frog Cards were discarded to the side.

“How can you live with yourself, Abraxas?” Tom asked, genuinely wishing to know the answer. How was it even *possible* that Abraxas’ pockets were more of a disgrace than his schoolbag?

“One second, Tom…”

An *enchanted razor* was next fished from his breast pocket and dumped on the table. Then, from his left trouser pocket followed a handkerchief, one of Dr. Filibuster’s Fireworks, and an extremely grimy, folded piece of parchment.

“Your final list of confirmations and declinations, Tom,” Abraxas finished proudly, holding out the paper. “Because the confirmation date was yesterday. I was going to give it to you last night, but I was too sloshed to remember.”

Scowling at the blonde, Tom pulled out his wand and cast *Scourgify* before accepting it.

It was a charmed parchment, connected to everyone’s invitation letter. The invitee simply had to tap their wand over the ‘*attending’* or ‘*unable to attend*’ writing at the bottom. On Abraxas’ parchment, the invitee’s decision would move their name into the relevant column, from the ‘*unconfirmed’* column.

‘*A Malfoy tradition, to do invites like that,’* Abraxas had informed him rather smugly, over a week ago. Tom hated to admit it, but it was rather clever.

The list was much as he expected. There were a few names in the ‘*unable to attend*’ section, from some Slytherin fifth- and seventh-years who were going home for the holidays. Everyone else he’d invited had their name under ‘*attending’* – bar one, which remained under ‘*unconfirmed’*.

Henry Evans.

Tom grimaced. Not only had he wasted a night dealing with drunk teenagers, not only had he not only had he ditched a duel that had the potential to be *fun* in spite of the difficult conversation that certainly would’ve preceded it*,* but he’d not gotten confirmation from the boy.

He would, though.

“Harry is attending,” Tom said decisively, copying the parchment with a muttered ‘*Geminio’*. He handed the original back to Abraxas, and placed his copy in his robe’s inner pocket – a pocket which wasn’t a disgrace to all things hygienic and clean, unlike a certain somebody’s pockets.

Abraxas squinted at him. His belongings were still all over the table – and on the floor. Tom would throw some of them at him to get him to *fix up his mess,* but they were all rather manky and he didn’t want to touch any of them.

“Who’s Harry?” the blonde asked.

“Henry Evans,” Tom supplied. “Harry is nickname that he got from a great-grandfather who was also a Henry. Or something like that. I didn’t understand it.”

Abraxas tilted his head to the side, inquisitively. A crease formed between his brows, and Tom could practically see the rusty cogs struggling to turn in his brain.

“Now that I think about it, there *is* a Henry in the Potter lineage. Great-grandfather, did you say?”

Tom raised an eyebrow, for once interested in what Abraxas had to say. Because of the common name, he’d assumed that *Henry* had been a Muggle great-grandfather, and he hadn’t bothered looked into it.

Clearly, he'd been wrong to assume.

"I did."

The blonde scrunched up his face in thought. "I'm afraid I don't remember where Henry Potter fits in. The Potters haven't ever been particularly exciting…"

Of course, the one thing that purebloods were good at – reciting pureblood family trees – Abraxas couldn't even do. Tom sighed heavily. It wasn't like they'd been helpful with identifying *his* lineage, either; he couldn't have expected any better.

Tom swallowed the final few mouthfuls of his coffee, delightful warmth spreading in his body. Then, he stood up abruptly.

There *was* some good to come of the fact that Abraxas' possessions were strewn all over the place; the boy called after him but couldn't follow his exit.

"Tom, where are you going?"

Tom entered the library ten minutes later. Five minutes following that, he had successfully navigated the shelves and pulled out his best friend from his younger years – Maverick Montague's *Pure-Blood Family Trees.* It had been published in 1908, so it was considerably more outdated compared to Cantankerus Nott's *Pure-Blood Dictionary,* published in the 1930s. However, Tom preferred Montague's book over Nott's, as he found Nott's to be unreliable and inaccurate. Not to mention, Nott had left out the Potters from his Sacred Twenty-Eight, so it was entirely useless for his purposes now.

Tom flipped through the thick, yellowing book until he landed on the page with the Potter family tree. A quick glance told him that it was largely unknown and lost to time, which wasn't atypical. The tree only became less foggy following births in the nineteenth century.

After a few minutes of tracing names with his finger, he found what he'd been looking for.

Henry Potter, 1870-?. He was the father of *Fleamont Potter, 1904-?.* He'd had no other children. According to Montague's book, anyway; it was possible Fleamont had younger siblings born after the publishing date of 1908.

Tom pursed his lips. Either way, something wasn't right. Harry had said he was eighteen (or so he thought, whatever that meant), which meant he'd been born in 1925. There was no way to fit another generation between Fleamont and Harry in order to work with the 'great grandfather' theory.

However, it was also possible that Henry Potter had a child born out of wedlock, much older than Fleamont who had been kept hidden and left off the family tree. Plenty of purebloods did that; the Lestrange family was a prime example.

Tom did the mental calculations. Assuming no one reproduced before graduating from Hogwarts, Henry's child could've been born as early as 1888, and their child as early as 1906… and then Harry was presumably born in 1925.

It *could* work, with a lot of procreating at very young ages. That wasn't impossible, but it was incredibly unlikely. Wizards tended to space their lifetimes out a lot better than Muggles, given that they lived longer.

Tom placed Montague's *Pure-Blood Family Trees* back on the library shelves, frowning heavily. There *never* was a clear, simple answer with the enigma that was Henry Evans.

He glanced towards the back of the library, wherein the bookcases were made of darker wood and the edges were more ornate. He hesitated for a second, then swallowed his pride. It was better to be wrong than suffer the consequences later.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> Thanks for all the support on this fic! I wasn't expecting so many people to enjoy a dramatic, semi-crackish interpretation of Tom haha
>
> I hope you all enjoy this update <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh. Hello.”

Harry had been sitting in the library, reading a book from the Restricted Section titled *Ministry Misdeeds of the 1890s.* He’d charmed it to appear otherwise to everyone but himself, of course; he had no desire for anyone to find out that he was reading up on time-travel experiments.

He looked up, his heartbeat considerably faster than moments before. Tom Riddle was standing before him, mesmerizingly and threateningly handsome. His jawline was as sharp as ever, his cheekbones high and aristocratic, his cheeks slightly gaunt in a way that was not yet inhuman, but rather enhanced his features. His dark brown hair had a slight wave to it, and his dark eyes were piercing.

“Tom,” Harry greeted. He searched Riddle’s face for a trace of his signature murderous rage, but found none. He wasn’t whether that was because he was incapable of reading the Slytherin or whether Riddle truly had no ill intentions towards him. In all honesty, he’d expected for an *Avada Kedavra* to be thrown his way the moment he’d started speaking on horcruxes and hinted that he knew Riddle had one already.

Then again, Myrtle had died the previous year. Another incident *would* probably get the school shut down, even if it were unrelated to the Chamber of Secrets. If Harry was sure of anything in the world, it was that Riddle never wanted to return to Wool’s orphanage.

“Harry,” Riddle replied. It was incredibly weird, hearing his name be spoken by Tom Riddle’s – Voldemort’s – lips without murderous intent. Harry wasn’t entirely sure why he’d given his real name to the boy, but it seemed like the right thing to do, considering Riddle hated being called ‘Tom’ yet had offered that name to him. “What reason

could you possibly have for spending your holiday in the library?"

He spoke the same way Voldemort did. Pretentiously. The only difference was that he didn't refer to himself in the third person and he didn't spontaneously break out into villainous monologues.

"I could ask you the same question," Harry replied, raising an eyebrow.

His action was copied. A second passed, and then Riddle erected a privacy ward for them to speak in with a flick of his yew wand.

"I suppose it'll please you to know I'm researching soul magic again," he said.

Harry blinked in surprise. Riddle hadn't seemed like he had cared for Harry's opinion and experience with the matter whatsoever. It had seemed that 'I'll do research' was Riddle's excuse for escaping the conversation.

"I haven't found anything to back your claims up."

"Yet," Harry commented, though he highly doubted Riddle would find anything at all. Harry resisted the urge to run a hand through his hair; it was a despairing sort of action that he didn't want Riddle to be privy to.

Riddle's lips upturned slightly. Uncannily. Harry could not tell if he was sincerely smiling or if there was something sinister underlying the gesture. For simplicity's sake, he always considered it to the be latter. It was better to be on high alert than possibly delude himself.

"Indeed," Riddle replied. He *sounded* amused, but Harry couldn't trust it. When it came to Riddle, true amusement was only ever paired with the Cruciatus Curse. He highly doubted rather tense banter between a seventh-year transfer student genuinely interested the aspiring Dark Lord.

Riddle left him at the table and headed for the darker wood bookcases of the Restricted Section. A minute later, he returned with *The Secrets of the Darkest Art* and a thin volume named *The Essence of Self*. It was translated from Sanskrit; Harry had seen both the original and the translation in Grimmauld Place's library.

Riddle sat down opposite him. He flipped through the pages of *The Essence of Self* and said, "So, what are you reading?"

Harry picked his book off the table to show the cover to the Slytherin.

"*An Encyclopedia of Toads,*" Riddle read, raising one perfectly arched eyebrow. "It's not actually that, is it?"

Harry merely hummed in response. He could've chosen a better charmed appearance, but the point was to hide *what* he was reading; it didn't matter whether or not someone recognised the glamour. Riddle probably would've noticed the glamour even if it was something less suspiciously ordinary anyway.

Harry resumed reading the page he was on, regarding a time-traveller named Eloise Mintumble. He was unfortunately aware that Riddle was observing him indiscreetly.

"I can't quite work you out," Riddle said after a couple of seconds. "You're quite fascinating."

"Funny," Harry replied, idly thumbing the corner of his page. "I can't quite work out if that's a compliment or an insult or a threat or none of the above."

Riddle continued as if he hadn't heard him. "You're quite bold. I can see that translating to bravery. You're certainly a Gryffindor. Yet there's something sly in the way you cling to your secrets."

Harry raised his gaze. "Ever heard of privacy?"

Riddle pressed his lips into a thin, contemplative line. "There's even something sly in your boldness. It's not brash, made on a whim; it's more calculative, cunning. Slytherin was the reason why you Hatstalled, wasn't it?"

"You're enjoying psychoanalysing me, aren't you?"

"It's a pity you didn't end up with us," Riddle continued. Harry wondered why he even bothered commenting, but he continued to do so regardless.

"How fun is it, to be a Muggleborn in Slytherin?"

Riddle's gaze became solely, terrifyingly, fixed on him again. He seemed to be arguing in his mind, and Harry wagered he had it down to a tee. On one hand, Riddle wanted to tell him that he wasn't, as the non-Slytherin sector of the school thought, a Muggleborn. He'd probably say so in less savoury terms. On the other hand, Riddle

wanted to lie, state that being a Muggleborn hadn't held him back, because wouldn't require himself to reform his incredibly strange line of thought regarding Harry's apparent *Slytherin-ness*.

Riddle went with the option Harry thought he would. He ignored Harry's question entirely.

"You'd be an incredible Slytherin," Riddle said. "You look unassuming, and that'd be everyone's first mistake."

Harry wasn't so sure they were talking about him anymore.

"You're truly an unstoppable force of nature. You would take Slytherin House by storm, I'm sure. Anyone who obstructed your path would be blown out of it, whether they realised it or not. It would've been a pleasure to witness. The green tie would've gone nicely with your eyes, too."

Harry truly wasn't quite sure what to make of any of that, especially with the underlying implication that Riddle *wouldn't* be in his path. That assumption was so typically *arrogant* that it bordered on obtuse, yet it was also so *un-typical* of him. Complimenting someone, allowing someone else to make waves – that really wasn't him.

Harry decided to follow Riddle's lead and ignore absolutely everything about the declaration that seemed important. "A huge compliment, from the one who looks like he's God's gift to the Earth."

"Oh, Harry. You *are* a charmer," Riddle responded without missing a beat. "But I assure I am most certainly not that."

No; he was rather like Lucifer, the once-brightest of all God's angels. Pride would swallow him whole and spit out something else entirely.

"I did say *'looks',* not *'is'*."

Riddle smiled, and this time, Harry could sense the underlying danger within the expression. It was not, however, aimed at him. It was a threat targeted at the *world,* and it had been shared as though it were a secret between the two of them.

It was utterly terrifying because for the first time, Harry realised he had no idea what Riddle wanted from him. He doubted any of Riddle's sycophants received that expression. But if Riddle was not interacting with him in an attempt to recruit him, what *was* he doing?

Riddle turned his attention to *The Essence of Self* again, apparently finished speaking.

“When you’re done with them, leave them with me,” Harry said, glad for the escape of topic. “I’ll be in here all day, probably.”

Riddle nodded his acknowledgement.

*

On the day before winter solstice, Tom exited the Slytherin Common Room alongside all his fellow sixth-years for their first Apparition Lesson.

“-rather like everything was compressed, and I was being squeezed through a tube. It was quite hard to breathe – in fact, I think I forgot how to, for a few seconds afterwards,” Randolph was saying.

“*Wicked!”* Abraxas exclaimed, almost colliding with Tom in his excitement. Tom made the mistake of letting out an unpleasant noise; the blonde turned his attention to him. “Tom, have you Apparated before? Randolph has, he said-”

“I *heard* what he said,” Tom replied, already irritated, at the same time Randolph said,

“For the last time, *I* didn’t Apparate*,* Abraxas. My uncle Side-Alonged me to the Quidditch World Cup last summer.”

“I mean, it’s essentially the same thing. You still disappeared from one location, and then appeared in the next like-” Abraxas made an unintelligible gesture, “-poof! Apparition. It’s so exciting.”

“*Nauseating*. You’re in for a shock – or maybe not, because I doubt you’ll ever manage to move more than two feet, Malfoy.”

“*Malfoy,* again, is it? Do you remember how badly that went for you last time, Le-”

Thankfully, their childish argument was interrupted somewhat unwittingly by Viridian.

“Personally, I’d rather take a Portkey. My Aunt Cerise, she sees

Splinches all the time at St. Mungo's. It's *hideous.* Like, bits of arms and legs become separated from the arms and legs." The boy shuddered.

"That's the really terrible ones, though," Abraxas replied. "I reckon most people Splinch a few hairs here and there and don't even notice."

"That's not true at all," Tom interrupted, irritated. It seemed that like usual, he was the only one who'd bothered to read up on the theory. "As long as there's sufficient determination-"

His words were cut short by Clyde yelling out to the four Slytherin girls that were walking a few paces ahead of them.

"Selwyn! Gibbon! Why didn't Reyes sign up for Apparition lessons?"

The four girls, including the unmentioned Lowe and Parkinson, whirled around.

"Didn't you know? Yolanda's mother remarried a filthy *Muggle,"* Lowe sneered. "They wanted her home to celebrate *Christmas."*

"If I was Yolanda, I'd be disowning my own mother," Selwyn declared loudly. "It's a tradition for us sixth-years to learn to Apparate and celebrate Yule all together. And really-"

"Actually," Abraxas interrupted. The four girls had slowed down and their groups had merged, which meant eight eyes were suddenly on the blonde. "They're thinking about doing away with the lessons over Yule. My father-"

"Oh, yes," Randolph snickered. "Your father, the great Brutus Malfoy the Fourth. We'd *love* to hear about him."

"Shut up, Lestrange. As I was saying, he's on the school's Board of Governors. Apparently, lots of mudblood kids and parents have complained-"

"It's always the *mudbloods,"* Selwyn mocked.

"-because it's a Christmas thing, that they're all at home with their families. The mudbloods don't see the point in the traditions of Yule-"

"Quiet," Tom called; they'd reached the final corridor before the Great Hall and they couldn't be heard speaking their minds in front of several instructors, teaching staff and the rest of their year.

“It’s just a *maybe* thing,” Abraxas said more quietly.

“Well, *I don’t like that maybe,* get your father to-”

But whatever Selwyn wanted Brutus Malfoy the Fourth to do, Tom didn’t hear. His attention had been immediately drawn to the front-left, where a boy with inky black hair was having a conversation with one of the instructors.

Tom’s heartrate increased. *Harry,* the boy who seemed to occupy his thoughts at least half of the time, these days.

He was just so *different* to anyone else he’d ever met. Once he’d stopped presenting himself as strangely and impossibly even, he’d become so unashamedly *himself.* It was so different to the pretentious airs that purebloods wore. Yet, despite the openness with which he now interacted, he was steeped in mystery and intrigue. Even though Tom had a better idea of his history than likely anyone else in the school, he was still missing big pieces of the story.

The Gryffindor was, as he had stated just yesterday in the library, *fascinating.* Beyond fascinating, in all seriousness. His appearance – dishevelled, always, but in an artful, wild way – roped in him as much as his behaviour. Gryffindor boldness on the surface, Gryffindor bravery seeping all through the middle, but there *was* something sly, cunning underneath it all that Tom couldn’t quite put a finger on. There was resourcefulness tied to that *thing* he couldn’t work out, too.

Tom *wished, fervently* that Harry had been a Slytherin. They would’ve met all the way back in September, then, and Tom would’ve had far more opportunities to explore the depths of Harry’s character. He would’ve had far more opportunities to work out how to rope the boy in, to *him,* bare his loyalty to *him.*

The rope seemed to go both ways. Harry was always finding him, but Tom also always to seek him out, regardless of how their relationship was at the present moment. Distant and unknown, or friendly and bantering but new and still slightly reserved, or tense and scornful, or back to friendly and bantering; Tom *always* wanted to pursue him.

Predictably, he sought the boy out in this case. His body moved on its own accord, squeezing through the groups of his year-mates scattered across the Great Hall.

“We’ll move into the Entrance Hall, dear, I’ll just confirm with Instructor Orpington…” a middle-aged woman said to Harry.

“Of course, madam,” Harry nodded.

The woman strode over to her colleague in the front-centre of the Great Hall, who was waiting for the final students to trickle in.

“Harry. Why are you here?” Tom asked, seizing his opportunity for a conversation.

There were a scarce few seventh-years among the crowd, who’d either not taken lessons in their own sixth-year or had failed the examination the previous year. Tom found it hard to believe that Harry would belong to either of those categories, however.

Harry spun around and a crease formed in his brow. “I’m here to take my Apparition exam,” he said.

“You failed the first time around?”

“I never took my exam,” Harry replied, sounding vaguely offended. “Contacted the Ministry months ago, they decided to send an examiner with the instructor. It’s weird, that they put the lessons in the holidays.”

Tom frowned, recalling Abraxas’ interrupted ramblings about Apparition and Yuletide minutes prior. He hoped Harry wasn’t one of the ones who wished to upset tradition. Perhaps he was simply poorly informed, being a new student with a questionable blood status, and a Gryffindor.

“Sixth-years always stay over the winter break. We have our first two Apparition lessons, one the day before the twelve-celebration of Yule and one after,” Tom explained. “It’s the only year we all properly come together, as a community, to celebrate Yule. It’s a tradition. A coming-of-age one, almost.”

“I never knew,” Harry said, looking thoughtful. “But I thought Hogwarts celebrated Christmas?”

Tom breathed a sigh of relief, internally. Poorly informed rather than wishing to dismantle tradition; it was unfortunate, but forgivable.

“We used to celebrate Yule as a school, but now it’s really only Slytherin House,” Tom replied, barely able to keep the disdain from his tone. “You’re welcome to join us tomorrow, however.”

It was less of an invitation and more of an order, but before Harry

could say anything at all in response, the examiner returned and interrupted.

“Mr. Evans? There you are, dear, the Entrance Hall is all ready for us.”

“I’ll talk to you later, Tom,” Harry said, allowing himself to be lead away and out of the Great Hall.

Tom didn’t acknowledge that any more than a nod. He wondered how his Housemates – and more specially, his Knights – would react to Harry. All his seventh-year Knights seemed begrudgingly impressed by him, and despite Abraxas’ Quidditch rant, the blonde didn’t seem too hostile after Tom had pretended – correctly, it seemed – that the Potter relation rumours were true.

His other Knights, however, would probably reacted poorly. Harry *was* a Gryffindor and assumed as a mudblood or a bastard of a family whose politics were far less traditional than theirs. Those obstacles were all inevitable, however; he planned to bring the boy into his circle eventually, to have the boy’s loyalty completely.

Contemplating to himself about the best course of action, Tom wove his way through his year-mates to where his group of Slytherins had congregated. Their instructor cleared his throat a couple of seconds after he’d made his way back, and the Great Hall fell silent. Tom noted that had he had a paricularly unattractive wart on his nose as he introduced himself, explained that the Anti-Disapparition Wards had been removed from within the Great Hall and Entrance Hall temporarily, and overviewed the ‘three D’s of successful Apparition’.

Destination, Determination, Deliberation: Tom knew it already. Thankfully, Instructor Warty Nose - Instructor *Orpington* - didn’t drone on and only spoke a couple of sentences on the matter. He waved his wand to conjure an old wooden hoop before everyone in the Great Hall and told them to start attempting in “THREE-”

“*Already?”* Abraxas protested from two places away. He was among the many that looked greatly alarmed at having being told to attempt so quickly, but Tom was grateful. He wanted to master the skill as soon as possible.

“TWO – ONE!”

Tom fixed his mind firmly upon his destination of the wooden hoop, and then turned. He stumbled and looked down to find that he had simply spun on the spot, and his hoop was still before him. Grimacing,

he looked around and found that no one else had succeeded, either. Abraxas had done a one-eighty and was staring blankly at the Hufflepuff behind him, Clyde was staggering and Selwyn had tripped on her hoop and fallen to the floor, which was precisely what she deserved. She was, in Tom's opinion, the sixth-year equivalent of Walburga Black. In fact, Tom was certain that they were close friends.

"I hardly expected you to get it on the first try," Instructor Warty Nose yelled over the hubbub of disappointment. "Return to your original position and try again. Remember, you need *determination* to reach your *destination,* and move with *deliberation!* THREE – TWO – ONE!"

The second attempt was no more successful than the first, for him or anyone else. Tom took glee in the fact that both Abraxas and a loud, brazen Gryffindor boy named Moody fell flat on their bottoms.

However, his temper quickly rose. While he didn't get most spells on the first try, *something* usually happened on his first attempt. Mastery typically didn't take long because he was quick at identifying what little nuance he was doing incorrectly. However, Warty Nose's constant cries of '*Destination, Determination, Deliberation!'* were entirely useless and didn't help him identify anything at all.

On their seventh attempt, something noteworthy finally happened. There was a shout from the front of the Hall, and Tom looked over to see that the Ravenclaw Prefect, Droope, was standing within her hoop. However, both of her arms were floating two feet in the air behind her, and blood had started to sprout all over the floor. Her surrounding friends began to cry out.

With that sight, Tom decided that it was just as well that nothing had happened to him yet. Better to capitalise off someone else's mistakes than it be himself who was embarrassed and horrified.

Several Hogwarts staff hurried over, there was a *bang* and a puff of purple smoke. When it cleared, Droope was reunited with her arms but she was visibly trembling.

"The separation of body parts is known as Splinching," their Instructor called, over the horrified cries that were still reverberating from Droope's nearby friends. "It occurs when the mind is insufficiently *determined…*"

Useless, Warty Nose was. Tom had never wanted to enter a wooden hoop more in his life before, but no matter how hard he tried, no matter how inelegant his frustrated, scrunched facial expressions

became, he could not get himself into the hoop. By the end of the hour, he still hadn't succeeded – nor had anyone else. A foot had become detached and quickly reattached, but that and Droope's Splinch were the most interesting things that had occurred.

"I think I saw nothingness on that last attempt," Abraxas said loudly as they exited the Great Hall. Tom didn't believe him for a second.

"I literally saw you rolling on the ground," Randolph said, poorly containing laughter.

"And what if I Apparated myself into that position?"

Tom tuned their bickering out. He caught sight of Harry striding purposefully across the Entrance Hall, heading directly for him. He grimaced – the boy's confidence was really not what he wanted to see after that abysmal hour.

"Hello, Tom."

"Did you pass?" Tom returned bitterly.

"I've Apparated hundreds of times before," Harry answered. "I'm guessing no one got anywhere, including you?"

Tom scowled in response.

"When I learnt, I didn't manage to Apparate until, like, the tenth lesson. In fact, I don't think anyone at all succeeded until the sixth or seventh," Harry supplied. "I'm sure you'll succeed far sooner than that."

The vote of confidence was nice, Tom decided, but it still wasn't what he wanted to hear. He didn't particularly want to hear anything at all – and especially not Abraxas calling out to him.

"Tom, why are you lagging behind- oh." Abraxas paused upon seeing who he was talking with. "You're Evans, right? I'm Abraxas Malfoy. I'm organising Tom's birthday party."

Harry looked utterly thrown as the blonde held out his hand, and Tom wondered if he had that reaction to everyone. He was, however, glad that Abraxas had chosen to not be hostile in the slightest. *This* was why he kept the blonde around – he might thick at times, but when it came to social spheres or political realms, Abraxas knew what the wisest course of action was. He was a Malfoy Heir, after all.

“Henry Evans,” Harry said after a moment, and shook the hand. Tom had an urge to tear their hands apart, but thankfully the moment was over soon enough. “Well met, Heir Malfoy.”

Abraxas looked surprised by the traditional pureblood introduction.

“And you, Heir Lestrange.”

Randolph, who was a step behind Abraxas, looked incensed. Harry hadn’t offered up ‘well met’. It was rude but excusable, as it was practically a continuation of his sentence. Tom highly doubted it was unintentional, and he wondered what the grudge was there.

They shook hands stiffly.

“You’re the only Gryffindor that Tom’s invited,” Randolph said, and Tom was sure they all heard *you’re unworthy of attending, being either a mudblood or a bastard.*

Tom resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. The Lestranges were politically inclined in most generations, but they were far less adept at it than the Malfoys, and it *showed.*

“That’s interesting,” Harry responded levelly. Randolph’s expression wound up tighter at the lack of reaction. “I hope you both don’t mind, but I was going to speak to Tom in private.”

Randolph made a disagreeable noise that they both ignored.

Private. That meant Harry *wasn’t* planning to talk about Yule – no, it was about horcruxes. Tom, despite his anger and feelings of betrayal relating to the topic having large cooled down, did not want to enter that conversation whatsoever.

“I never agreed to this,” Tom replied.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Well, I’m sure we could speak in public, too,” he said, ever-so-placidly. “See, when I was rereading *The Secrets*-“

Harry was probably speaking just to provoke him into agreeing, but he couldn’t be entirely sure. Maybe he truly had no qualms about speaking of horcruxes in public.

“I was joking,” Tom interrupted, a little desperately.

“Brilliant,” Harry said, and there was a glint of amusement in his

otherwise even expression that made Tom incredibly, incredibly... angry but fascinated at the same time. The Gryffindor knew exactly what he had been doing, forcing him to go back on his word. The boy had recognised the power dynamics an entire week ago, when he'd dared to call Tom's Knights a 'gang'.

"Would you take a walk around the grounds with me?"

It wasn't like he had much of a choice.

"Sure," he said, injecting false cheerfulness into the word.

They exited the Entrance Hall side-by-side, in tense silence. His Knights gazed confusedly in their wake, entirely oblivious to what had just transpired.

It was cold and gloomy outside of the castle. The winter sun's weak warmth was further nullified by a parade of heavy grey clouds, and Tom involuntary shivered. He lamented the fact that he didn't have his scarf and mittens with him, but he'd swallowed his pride enough recently. He wasn't going to admit to being defeated by the cold, too.

Tom had no desire to start the conversation, but the silence was also unbearable. He wondered what on Earth Harry hoped to achieve with it. If it was a power play, it was a pathetic one.

They walked down the stone steps to the boatshed. There was no sounds of animal life from the nearby Forbidden Forest, no crows cawing overhead. It was rather like the quiet before the storm, and by the time they were halfway across the Black Lake, Tom grew weary of it.

"Are you ever going to spit out what you wanted to say?" he asked.

Harry raised his eyebrows, but didn't comment on the bite in his voice. Instead, he replied, "Intentional, cold-blooded murder – not self-defence or a mercy killing – rips the soul apart. As Slughorn said, it's considered a supreme act of evil."

"I know this," Tom interrupted.

"Let me finish," Harry said, and begrudgingly, Tom did. "I reread *The Secrets of the Darkest Art* again, and it contained a more accurate description, I think. Murder rips the soul apart because it's *an act against human nature. W*hen you put a shard of your soul in something, you're embracing that inhumanity. And of course, it makes sense

when you consider the purpose of a horcrux. Mortality is a human trait; immortality is inhuman. So it stands to reason that you're rejecting other human traits in favour of inhumane ones, too. Human emotions. Self-awareness. Moral sensibilities. And as I've drawn your attention to, rationality."

Tom could recall the very line that Harry was referring to with the ease of someone who'd read *The Secrets of the Darkest Art* dozens of times. He'd even pondered the difference between Slughorn's reasoning and the one in the Dark Arts book when he'd been in the library on Saturday *and* Sunday. He hadn't drawn any conclusions – but it seemed Harry had.

His conclusions made a certain amount of sense, too.

Tom swallowed, suddenly overcome by several foreign emotions. Some, he could name, identify and categorise, and others he couldn't. He was *awed* by the intelligence of the boy, *admiring* of the boy's bluntness. He was *appreciative* of the boy's ever-alluring appearance. There was also an emotion that felt heated and powerful. It was like the feeling of Harry's warm, calloused hand in his, only all-encompassing and *devastating* in its strength.

He stared at Harry for a very long time, those emotions swimming within him. His eyes roved of the boy's features: the jet-black hair, the glow of his skin, the bright green eyes, the full lips, the set of his chin. He wasn't conventionally beautiful; he didn't have the aristocratic cheekbones, nor the slight and manageable wave in his hair, nor was his skin porcelain, nor did he have the oval face shape.

He was entirely stunning, however. It was all about the deeper connotations at play. His hair was frankly a disgrace but it also looked unbearably soft to the touch. His sun-kissed skin implied athleticism and an enjoyment of the outdoors. His eyes were bright and shrewd, and their depths hinted at so many untold stories. The jut of his chin was determined, fierce, stubborn, but those Gryffindorish traits weren't unbearable when they were in conjunction with everything else that Harry was.

His eyes fell to the boy's lips once again, and his thoughts stumbled over each other incoherently for a second before continuing on haphazardly, like a trainwreck waiting to happen.

His lips looked inviting, Tom thought.

Harry was expecting a response of some kind, and Tom rather wanted

to give him one. He wanted to use a hand to tilt the boy's chin up slightly and thumb the boy's jawline as he did so. He wanted to lean in, press their mouths together and see what all the fuss was about.

He'd never been inclined to such behaviours before. He'd considered himself above anyone who might be interested in engaging with him. There was no need for him to stoop to their level of baser instincts.

Harry, however? He might be an emotional and obnoxious Gryffindor, and there was still the slimmest possibility that he was a mudblood – but none of that waned his interest whatsoever. The conviction in his words was so strong that even Tom found himself listening. The confidence within him was not born from arrogance, but rather it was deserved; it came from experiences that Tom didn't know but wished to, very much. He had persevered through hardships that Tom could barely understand with his limited knowledge of the boy's history, and he had come out of *so, so fierce*.

"You look rather intense," Harry said, interrupting his thoughts. "Should I be watching out for my back?"

It took several seconds for the question to register. When it did, it took another few seconds for him to realise why on *Earth* Harry would ask that. *Horcruxes – murders* – right.

"You are the most interesting person I've ever met," Tom said. "I would never harm you."

An incredulous expression fixated itself on Harry's face.

"So, everyone else, then? They're all possible victims for horcrux creation just because they're uninteresting to you?"

That sort of challenge should've made him furious. With anyone else, it would've.

Instead, Tom felt that warm, overpowering emotion wash over him again, only this time he recognised it for what it was.

Desire.

It consumed him whole. He almost forgot to breathe, as he took in that *awful, alluring* expression of defiance. *Awful,* because he suddenly realised that Harry was too righteous and principled. The Gryffindor would undoubtedly fight him every step of the way, when he finally introduced the boy to his circle. Yet, he was still *alluring* in his

defiance, because it lit a spark within the boy's eyes, because it ignited *Tom's very soul,* spreading the warmth that he had been deprived of, as of late.

"Do you know, you're incredible?" Tom eventually breathed, feeling as though the universe had stopped and then restarted. Epiphany after epiphany would do that to anybody.

"That's all well and good and flattering, but-"

"You misunderstand me," Tom interrupted, shaking his head, vaguely amused. "I meant, I've listened to your tales and your claims. You are so captivating, so compelling, so convincing, that I've found myself believing everything you've said despite the absurdity of it all. You are incredible because you've influenced me. You've persuaded me."

"Oh," Harry said, sounding shocked. "That's good. You *are* saying you won't continue to split your soul, aren't you?

"Are you doubting me or your own persuasiveness?"

"Both?" Harry suggested. "You essentially told me I was below your notice, last Thursday. You wouldn't *undignify yourself* with me, I think you said." Tom winced. "All because we didn't share the same opinion. Now you're complimenting me and apparently open-minded. It seems rather contradictory and insincere."

Tom couldn't have fooled him if he'd tried. He was no Slughorn, moved easily by flattery; rather, it seemed he actively shied away from praise.

It was unacceptable. Tom wanted the world to sing Harry's praises until he believed every word of them.

"As I said, you're very convincing," Tom replied, shoving aside his thoughts, the flame of desire within him. "And I did actually do research in the weekend. I pondered over the same words as you, I just didn't form any definite conclusion. Probably because I didn't want to."

"Alright," Harry said.

"Alright?"

"I'd like to believe you, so let's say I do." There was a long pause, and then Harry started in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. "I want to

show you something," he said.

Tom stared at the back of Harry's short and slender figure for a second, swallowing. "You do know, it's called the *Forbidden* Forest?"

"Don't tell me that's going to stop you," Harry called over his shoulder, and Merlin forbid, Tom took a couple of long strides to catch up to him.

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm a prefect."

"I've noticed, but it doesn't seem to mean much. You've failed to take points off me, what, twice now? D'you reckon third time's the charm?"

"Ten points off Gryffindor for impertinence," Tom responded, and Harry snorted. Tom wanted to bottle the sound, but he wasn't quite sure how that would work.

They walked into the Forbidden Forest for quite some time. The trees slowly became less sparse as they walked, and their canopies became thicker and thicker. The air grew impossibly frostier, and Tom wished evermore that he'd brought mittens and a scarf with him.

Tom tried to hide his coldness, but apparently to no avail, because a couple minutes later, Harry asked, "Are you shivering? I can give you my scarf, if you want."

He began to take it off without waiting for a response.

"I'm really quite-" Tom began, reaching out to stop his movements. His hand barely touched the boy's, but it was enough for him to register *warmth*.

"Freezing cold. Gods, your hand is like ice," Harry finished, and held out his scarf. When Tom didn't take it and simply stared, he added, "A little red and yellow won't hurt you."

That was not the reason for his hesitation whatsoever. True, he'd rather *not* walk around in Gryffindor colours, but the real issue was that Harry was offering up his scarf.

It was a sacrificial kindness. An idiotic kindness: there were many people that would leech off it, use him as a stepping-stone, and leave him for naught. It was a good thing he hadn't been Sorted into Slytherin, perhaps; he wouldn't last two minutes with that sort of

attitude. He'd last even less in Wool's.

He accepted the abominably-coloured knitwear after another second's hesitation; he was one of the aforementioned people, after all.

"Thank you," he said, and he was genuinely grateful. As foolish as it may be, the crux of the matter stood; it was kindness, and Tom didn't know the last time he'd been shown it. In all fairness, he'd probably never given it, either.

He tied the scarf around his neck in a far more elegant way than Harry had it seconds ago. It was warm in the parts that had touched the boy's neck, and he relished in it. He resisted the urge to smell it.

They stopped in a section of the forest wherein the trees and their foliage were so thick that hardly any sunlight reached the ground. The area was suspended in twilight, creating an eerie sort of atmosphere.

There was a movement in the corner of his eye. He turned his head and squinted desperately; it had been in the distance, amongst the thicket of trees.

"Behind you, Tom," Harry called, humour colouring his tone.

Somewhat concerned, Tom turned back around. He unconsciously took a step backwards; there was a large, horse-like creature staring at him. Thin, semi-opaque black skin stretched across its skeleton, showing every protruding bone. The creature opened its mouth and bared sharp white fangs at him.

"Play nicely," Harry said to the creature.

"You brought me to a *thestral?"* Tom demanded. He watched, disturbed, as the creature stopped paying attention to him and instead trotted over to Harry, who reached out to stroke its neck.

"They're really quite friendly," Harry said, as if that justified anything. "This one I named Maximilian. You know, '*the greatest*'. He's the tallest one, their leader. He seemed to like it."

With horror, Tom realised plurality was correct. There were several thestrals surrounding them – or, perhaps, the better description was surrounding *Harry*. They all seemed to be staring at the Gryffindor inquisitively, or vying for his attention.

"In the name of Salazar and all things sweet," Tom said nonsensically,

horrified.

Of course the thestrals adored Harry. If he, who historically had only ever appreciated people for their uses, found himself liking Harry far beyond that, then of course the eerie creature would like him inexplicably too.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “They’re not omens of death, that’s just a common misconception.”

“No, I know that. I mean-” Tom spluttered, watching as Maximilan lowered its large, draconic head and rested it upon Harry’s shoulder. Tom shuddered, but Harry only continued to pet its neck. “He likes you. They *all* really like you.”

“Course they do. I’ve been visiting them all term.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Tom replied, absent-mindedly fingering the silver plaque of his Prefect badge. “What I meant – they’re attracted to blood.”

Harry hummed in agreement. “That’s true,” he said.

Tom stared as Maximilan nudged Harry one last time. His place was quickly replaced with another thestral, and Harry indulged its clingy behaviour too.

“Neither of us are bloody.”

Harry tilted his head, as if to say, *all in good time.* “Why don’t you like them?”

Tom contemplated his existence. He’d allowed himself to be taken *into the Forbidden Forest* to look at *thestrals* – his interest in the Gryffindor was getting a little worrying. It had been worrying from the beginning, in all honesty, but he’d not found it in himself to care. Still couldn’t.

“They’re eerie,” Tom answered. “All skeletal. I know that’s just how they are, but it makes them look…” *close to death.* “I was the only second-year who didn’t think the carriages were horseless. The Muggle war broke out that very same day. As the years trickled on, the war got worse and the Blitz happened, and a larger and larger percentage of the school could see them. They remind me-”

Tom stopped himself from rambling any further. He swallowed and

finished, “It’s not a nice connation.”

“Oh,” Harry said, sounding surprised. “You could see them in your second year?”

“If not for the first-year boat ride, I would’ve seen them then, too,” Tom answered. “I grew up in an orphanage. Scarlet fever and diphtheria and mumps and all the rest were quite commonplace.”

He wasn’t sure why he’d let on so much. This was the sort of information that got him scorned by Slytherin House, or pitied by a scarce few others. He despised both reactions.

Tom didn’t regret speaking, however. Harry’s eyes seemed to shine even brighter in the dark forest. His expression was earnest and understanding, not pitying nor scornful.

“I – well, I told you my parents were murdered when I was one, but I was too young to comprehend the events,” Harry volunteered. “One of my friends was murdered before my eyes in fourth year, and so I saw thestrals for the first time in fifth.”

Tom wasn’t sure what to say to that. He wasn’t sure what to do with the conversation as a whole. It was terrifyingly open – it was rather like baring his soul, and he already knew what Harry’s opinion of it was. *Mutilated.*

“It’s unfortunate that they’re so steeped in misconception and superstition. They’re clever, and loyal, I’ve found. Why don’t you-” Harry motioned to the thestral closest to Tom. It seemed to be the smallest of the herd, and had no interest in him whatsoever; it had been staring at Harry the entire time.

“I’m not patting it,” Tom said, and instantly regretted his words. The thestral turned its head and fixed its white, pupilless eyes upon him, then bared its teeth like Maximilan had. It was then that he realised the thestrals weren’t *just* trying to crowd around Harry – they were also trying stay away from *him*. “Besides, they all hate me.”

“Try to have an open mind,” Harry suggested.

“I-” *don’t know why I’m here, hate the way you act but I actually don’t,* “I’m suing you, if I get my head bitten off.”

“Sure you will,” Harry said dismissively, and gestured to the thestral again. “Her name’s Grace. She’s temperamental, but she won’t harm

you."

"I'm pretty sure they're all not harming me because *you're* here," Tom muttered, but he took a few steps forward all the same. Grace stared at him, fangs still on display. Tom collected himself, and then hesitantly reached out to touch the black, semi-opaque skin of her neck. It was silky beneath his fingers.

The creature indulged him for a few seconds and then shook a glossy mane. She seemed to glare at him, and then she trotted over to Harry.

"She doesn't like me," Tom said, somewhat bitterly. The feeling of rejection, it was unfortunately familiar. He'd been assumed as the mudblood of Slytherin for four years, after all, and Wool's had been much the same story.

Grace lowered her head and nudged Harry's hand with her snout. The boy petted it absent-mindedly. "I have a theory," he said.

"You have a lot of obscure theories, do you?"

Harry tilted his head. Tom took that as a *'yes',* and despite himself, found himself wanted to hear all of them.

"Well, they're not omens of death, no, but they're entwinned with the concept," Harry said. "Only people who've witnessed and understood death can see them. But there's different levels of understanding, and varying degrees of acceptance. I think they can sense that."

Of *course* this would come back to horcruxes – he should've guessed that. He found himself less irritated than he'd expected. Instead, he was *interested, fascinated* with the way Harry's mind worked, with the way that there was *always* something going on behind those intelligent eyes.

Tom stared at Grace, who Harry was still patting lightly. The Gryffindor's theory explained why they would hate him, but, "They like you so much because…?"

Harry paused his patting, an action which evidently upset Grace; she threw her mane back and stomped off.

"Temperamental, as I said," Harry said, shaking his head slightly. He sighed. "I've accepted death."

Tom resisted the urge to grit his teeth. "What does that even mean?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. “It means that I was the unwilling participant of a resurrection ritual at fourteen.”

“Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken,” Tom realised. He blinked at the Gryffindor, interest and fascination giving way to horror.

“Quite. Thought I was going to die after he was resurrected. There seemed to be no escape. I knew I’d rather not die a coward. So, I stepped out from where I’d been temporarily hiding and faced my would-be-murderer.”

He’d been correct in his assumption; the Gryffindor boy had courage in spades.

“And you escaped against the odds…?” Tom trailed off. As much as the boy’s apparent bravery enthralled him, the picture mortified him.

“Yeah.” Harry blew out his cheeks. “Then I accepted death again at seventeen.”

“You escaped another murder attempt?”

“Well, that’s not exactly accurate, but let’s go with that,” Harry answered.

Tom stared at him and wondered what the *hell* that meant. He felt something akin to wonder rise up in him. *Mortality was a weakness* – but yet Harry had faced multiple murder attempts and still didn’t see it that way. Tom didn’t understand him, but he admired the inner strength that he must have.

“Let’s go back to the castle,” Harry suggested after a couple of seconds of silence.

It was only when they were walking up the stairs to the Entrance Hall that Tom realised Harry hadn’t answered his question. Not properly, at least.

“You didn’t explain why thestrals are lured to you,” he said.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said vaguely. They paused at a split in the corridor. Left would eventually lead to the dungeons, and right would lead to several flights of swivelling staircases. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“I’m quite sure I would. I’ve believed everything else you’ve said.”

The Gryffindor fixed his brilliant emerald eyes upon him, and Tom

suddenly didn't want to separate and go to their respective Common Rooms.

"And that's true?" Harry asked. "You believe me about horcruxes? You won't continue to split your soul?

Tom answered, "No. I've already told you that you've convinced me."

Harry tilted his head as if to assess the credibility of his words, and then there was a smile on his face. It took Tom's breath away with its radiance. It was *for him, because of him.*

The same warmth and *need* that he'd recognised as need earlier swept over him. The same urges to kiss and *marvel* and *claim* returned, only they were amplified tenfold by the exchange of barbs and secrets they'd had.

He stepped forward, and placed two testing hands on Harry's slender waist. There was a sharp intake of breath.

"What are you doing…?" Harry asked. His voice was coloured with uncertainty, but he looked at Tom's lips, and that was all the confirmation he had wanted.

He lifted a hand to cup Harry's jaw. Wide, brilliant green eyes stared at him, confused and uncertain but trusting. Tom thumbed his jawline like he'd desired hours before, and Harry's pupils dilated minutely.

"I said you were incredible," Tom said, softly. "So, so incredible."

He tilted the boy's chin up. They were so close that Tom could feel Harry's intoxicating warmth, could smell the boy's earthy, piney scent, and he swore the magic inside him surged to meet the power contained within the other boy.

"Tom…?" Harry asked, slightly breathlessly, and Tom thought of how different his name sounded when it was formed by those lips. Not plain and common, but as if there was an achingly deep meaning to it, as if he were the only *Tom* in all of Britain.

Tom leaned in and kissed him. It was gentle, but everything he had wanted and more – Harry's lips were warm, soft, with a lingering, sweet taste to them and Tom's core seemed to *sing* at the touch. Harry must've felt it too, because he gasped, and a strong, firm, stabilising hand found the small of Tom's back.

"*Harry,*" Tom exhaled, pausing just write the scene into his memory. Harry, staring at his lips. Harry, dragging his gaze up, his brilliant green eyes seeming positively sinful with their allure. Harry looking at him in wonder. Harry's wide eyes, but not wide with wonder, no – it was something else now.

"Oh Gods," he said, and Tom realised it was horror in his eyes, horror in his voice. Then he was pushing away, scrambling backwards, leaving Tom cold.

If he'd thought his desire had been a sweeping wave of emotion, then the sudden feeling of *loss* was an entire tsunami that was capable of wrecking entire cities.

"What was the purpose of this, Tom? To get me off your back? 'Cause it's a real fucking weird way to do it."

"Harry – Harry," Tom said, attempting to placate but failing terribly under the wreak of his emotions. Harry was looking at him like he was the one to drop bombs on London every night for eight months straight, and he had no idea how to bear it. "What in Salazar's name are you talking about?"

"Your *eyes,* Riddle. They flickered red," Harry said, and Tom recalled, as though it were a lifetime ago, the Gryffindor telling him that *the body and mind reflect the soul.* He'd not explained what he'd meant by '*body',* and Tom had forgotten it, until now. "I was fool at twelve, and I stayed fool at eighteen – I can't believe *I let you kiss me!*"

Tom froze, desperately trying to put together words that would explain his actions, his rash decisions, his change of mind the very following day, but nothing came out. It was exactly the sort of irrationality he had been warned about.

He was still receiving that horrible, horrified expression, and he thought it couldn't possibly get worse.

Of course, it could always get worse. Harry spoke again.

"I can't believe I *believed you*, even for just a minute. The wizard I've been talking about, Riddle? That's *you.* I'm a time-traveller."

It took a second for the words to register, but then he took a mortified step backwards. They were now both looking at each other, appalled, disgusted, aghast. Chests heaving, heart racing.

“Then, it was *me* that you murdered,” Tom let out, and with those words, anger replaced every bit of stunted horror and stupid loss and stupid, stupid, lingering desire in his bones, every bit of confusion. “You *tricked* me. All this talk about truthfulness… omission is still lying, you – you *bastard!”*

“I’m trying to *help you and not get killed in the process!”* Harry exclaimed in response. “But you won’t ever listen to anyone but yourself, you’re *so* arrogant-”

Tom didn’t want to hear *anything* his own murderer told him. He’d rip all the important information straight from Harry’s mind, and then he’d wipe Harry’s memory, and he’d kill all of Harry’s predecessors, and he’d prevent his own death, and-

He’d pulled out his wand before either of them comprehend it. “*Legilimens,”* he cried.

Harry’s mind was unguarded. The clutter of *everything* was a protection in own right, however – Tom had been in and out of his stray thoughts before and had wanted to never enter them again, let along sift through anything as deep as memories. This wasn’t something he could avoid doing, however – he *needed* to know.

Legilimency was a natural talent, but he was still only sixteen – going on seventeen – so he wasn’t a complete master of it, yet. Harry’s thoughts and memories all whirred past him. He struggled against the current of chaos for a couple of moments before he took a better grip of the boy’s mind, and then probed for *Tom Riddle’s death*.

*A hat, a gleaming silver sword with rubies the size of eggs, a Parseltongue shriek of ‘*KILL THE BOY! SNIFF – SMELL HIM!*’ vast, bloody eye sockets, warm blood drenching hands, everlasting pain relieved by tears, a fang plunging through the heart of black leather-bound diary, a long, piercing scream, flaming red hair-*

His *Basilisk*, and his *horcrux* – but that hadn’t been what he’d intended on seeing. He’d used the wrong name in his probing, of *course* he should’ve used *Lord Voldemort.*

*A blood-red stone in a mirror, a man with a turban that unfurled to reveal a chalk white face with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, a hissed whisper of ‘*they died begging me for mercy*’ followed by a shout of ‘*LIAR!*’, needle-sharp pain and blistering hands and darkness-*

A gleaming crystal cup grasped with a boy donned in a yellow uniform, a

hissed 'kill the spare' *and a flash of green light, a marble headstone, blood seeping down an arm, a sinisterly simmering cauldron and a pale, skeletal figure rising from it with eyes from hell, a high, cold voice saying,* 'I can touch you now'*, searing white-hot pain followed by mindless bliss and then a defiant* 'I WON'T!*' and more all-consuming agony, a jet of red and green light, golden threads and wispy figures, and a scream of fury-*

That was not what he wanted to see either, whatever it was, whatever the *hell* it was. Tom didn't want to see that all. *Lord Voldemort's death,* he probed, grasping firmer on the current of memories in Harry's mind. He slowed it down for comprehension rather than allowing it to proceed as a fast-paced nightmare.

A hall with tall but crumbling walls, pale skin stretched across a skull, hideousness complete with gleaming red eyes and nostrils that were slits, hundreds of people giving their unwavering attention to a long exchange that they barely understood but was undoubtedly important.

Then, two uttered spells, one a bright green, the same colour as defiant, fierce eyes, and the other an infernal red, the same colour as terrible, remorseless eyes. A bang like a cannon blast, golden flames, a wand spinning in the air in the sunrise, a tall, skeletal figure hitting the floor, a lacklustre ending-

Tom pulled out of Harry's mind, the dozens of images he'd just seen swimming in his vision before him.

"Are you satisfied, now that you've assaulted my mind, Riddle?" Harry looked like he was trembling, and Tom was too. Still, his voice was commanding and sturdy and convincing, the sort that broke through hundreds of duels, demanded silence and forced even monsters to listen.

"Are you satisfied with what you've seen? Or would like some more detail?"

No, Tom thought desperately, but no sound escaped his mouth.

"You pillage Hogwarts. You and your army murder *so many* of my friends and family. You oppress Muggleborns, torture them and murder them. You murder entire villages of Muggles. You torture and murder anyone regardless of whether they're follower or foe. Gods knows why you even care about blood supremacy in the first place, but you certainly don't elevate purebloods either. Half of the Sacred Twenty-Eight either die out or end up in Azkaban with life sentences because of the wars you wage.

“Your regime is ruthless and bloody and achieves *nothing* beyond fear and the deterioration of society. You’re responsible for the decline of innovation and education for years on end. You wreak torment and destruction with every action; with every word; with every breath.”

Tom’s brain was utterly frozen.

“Even with all that,” Harry said. “I’m not here out of spite. I want to *help* you off your destructive and self-destructive path because despite everything, I care about your fate – that agonising eternity. Yet you’re *so arrogant,* and you won’t listen to someone else for *just one second.”*

His expression was scathing and disappointed. Then, before Tom could even begin to form a response to anything that he’d said, he’d crossed the length of the right corridor and disappeared up a staircase.

Tom didn’t move from the fork in the corridor for several minutes. His brain was sluggish with the overload of information, with the horror clogging his veins, with the sense of *anguish* overwhelming him.

When he eventually moved, he kicked the stretch of stone wall beside him and swore. His right foot throbbed and there were surely scuff marks on his shoe, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care. He could only think about trusting green eyes turning horrified.

His plan to collapse on his bed and stare up at the canopy of his four-poster, thinking and pitying himself, was dismantled the second he entered the Slytherin Common Room.

“Tom!” Abraxas exclaimed, looking up from where he’d been bickering with the only other occupant of the room. “We were just wondering where you were, you’ve been gone ages.”

“Why the fuck are you wearing a Gryffindor scarf?” Randolph asked, his tone demanding and disdainful.

Tom tilted his head downwards to stare at the abominable red-and-yellow colours. He tugged the knitwear until it came undone, desiring to get a better look at the evidence of *Harry*. Harry, I-am-not-here-out-of-spite Harry. Harry and all his courage and perseverance.

His action was misinterpreted, grievously so.

“Did he make advances on you? Do you want us to deal with that bast-”

“*Crucio!”*

It was an automatic response. It was him leaning on the crutch that was cruelty and fear. He forgot everything else but his hatred and his desire to make someone so repulsive *hurt.* Randolph writhed and collapsed to the ground, screaming, while Abraxas let out horrified pleas that he barely heard.

It had been a while since he had turned the Cruciatus on anyone. He smiled through his inflicted torment, and he delighted in the heady rush of power.

At least, he did until fragments of Harry’s memories slipped into the forefront of his mind. His hand slacked, the image of a graveyard and a green-eyed defiant boy writhing at the flick of a yew wand making him sick to the core.

Randolph trembled before him at the curse’s release, a string of sycophantic sentences escaping his mouth. Tom didn’t care for any of it, seeing it only as pathetic, weak-willed behaviour. Harry wouldn’t act like that at all – he’d be on his feet immediately, looking at him with fierce eyes that blazed with defiance and *disgust-*

“Know your place*,”* Tom scorned, fighting the urge to inflict another red light of suffering upon the groveller. “Know that it is far, far, below the man you deride, Lestrange.”

Words were spluttered in response, all in truncated sentences that Tom had no patience for. He didn’t want to see the shaking, repulsive form of assuming Randolph Lestrange any more than he wanted to see the wide-eyed, fearful one of useless Abraxas Malfoy.

“Get out of my sight,” he spat, and they didn’t need to be told twice. They fled the Common Room, Abraxas half-dragging his stumbling dormmate along. Cruelly, Tom hoped Randolph’s tormented muscles protested and spasmed and *burned.*

Chapter End Notes

so... they kissed. but at what cost.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tom tossed and turned beneath layers upon layers of green bedding. His mind was a tumultuous storm of half-formed thoughts and fleeting images – memories that belonged to another. His sleep came rarely, and in intervals that seemed to be mere seconds long. Every single time he woke, he'd find his heart beating erratically, a shout of terror on the tip of his tongue.

He dreamed rarely, but when he did, it was always of the Muggle war; of bombs and sirens and little dead children and overcrowded Underground stations. His dreams tonight were a new level of nightmare that caused the blood in his veins to freeze to ice, that caused him to wake up with cold sweat dripping down his face.

Tom dreamed of evacuation sirens. He saw himself running from a perspective that seemed neither first nor third, rather like he wasn't in his own in skin. His dream-self ran endlessly, but it was all aimless, because he only reached a serpentine face that smiled with all teeth, whose words were high and cold and underscored a desire to cause utter *agony.* When he turned, he found himself staring at the writhing form of a boy with inky black hair – and then *he* was writhing from the perceived feeling of red-hot knives carving into his skin. A few seconds reprieve granted him the chance to see his attacker, and it was a monster with red eyes that warped into a boy with red eyes – and then he was writhing again, being shown no mercy-

Tom woke with a gasp, with fear gripping his heart, and the red flash of a Cruciatus on his mind. It had been *him.* He'd been *Harry,* and it was *him* who had… – and half an hour later, with those same half-formed thoughts on his mind, he'd fall into a peaceless sleep again.

He dreamed of the Underground, of sirens that sent people into a mad panic, of panic that caused a stampede. He dreamed that he was fighting for his life, fighting not to get trampled upon – and he dreamed that *he* trampled upon someone. He looked down, more curious than he was horrified, but that quickly changed when glassy green eyes stared back at him.

Dead, dead, dead – and the Underground warped into the middle of

London, where sirens shrieked through the night and bombs lit up the sky and buildings crumbled around them. The green-eyed boy was *dead*, but his lips parted to mouth the accusation of murder all the same. He was dead, and Tom cried and *yelled* that he hadn't meant to, that it was the Germans and their bombing that caused the sirens that caused the panic that caused *him*-

He woke up with the words, "I *didn't!"* on his tongue and a foreign emotion dragging his heart *down, down, down,* down into a bottomless pit. *I didn't, I didn't, I wouldn't…* – and yet he drifted into unconsciousness with sureness that he *had.*

He dreamt of crumbling London. He watched families lose their home or their members, he watched walls collapse and buildings vanish into thin air. He watched it all with a sense of detachment, but that evaporated when he felt a gaze on him – the gaze of green eyes that glowed in the night.

"This is your doing," the boy said. "You've done this and you will do it. You are doing it right now."

"I *didn't!"* he yelled back to the boy, but the two words that rolled off his tongue were the two of a curse that promised death. *I didn't, I didn't, I didn't* – but if he *didn't,* then why was the boy motionless, why was London *dying* and *falling*-

*"*If you did not, then you will," he was told by a boy whose voice box shouldn't function because he was *notalivenotalive*. He screamed at the boy who dared, and he woke with the sinking feeling that *he will.*

"I won't," Tom told himself while he reached for his wand to conjure a glass of water. His hands were shaking and his dream was already slipping from his mind, but he repeated, '*I won't*' to his four-poster's curtains irrespective. It felt important – more important that the cold water that slipped down his throat and the glass he promptly vanished and the continual tremble of his hands.

He didn't want to go back to sleep. He didn't want to be greeted by endless nightmares and a sinking feeling of – *of something.* Whatever it was that dragged his heart down and clogged his veins with ice when he pictured glassy green eyes.

He threw a robe over his second-hand pyjamas. He tied up his black leather shoes – *not dragon hide,* he wasn't Abraxas Malfoy or any of the other the purebloods who slept soundly in his dormitory – and left, pocketing his yew wand along the way.

He briefly wondered what he was doing and where he was planning on going, but he found he didn't care for the answer. He simply let his feet carrying him out of the dungeons, up winding corridors and into the cold winter's night. Tom shivered and hugged his arms as he looked around.

The sky was no longer occupied by ominous dark grey clouds. Instead, the moon – nearly full – could be seen dousing the school grounds in a faint light. Thousands and thousands of stars hung in the night, all of which couldn't be seen from smoky, war-torn London. Tom breathed deeply, the sight soothing him a little.

He rubbed his eyes the next second. He had spied a movement in his peripheral vision, around the edge of the Forbidden Forest. When he squinted, he could see he hadn't completely lost his mind – there was a silhouette making its way into the thicket of trees.

Tom knew immediately, instinctively, that it was Harry. Harry *Potter,* if the taunts of Lord Voldemort – *nonono, not his future self, not him* – were to be believed. *Harry Potter*… what a name that was, plain yet melodic in the way it rolled off his tongue. It was fitting.

Entering the Forbidden Forest at night was against all common sense, all reason, all survival instincts, but Tom's feet moved themselves in that direction regardless. His brain chanted *make amends make amends make amends,* and who was he, to deny himself his desires?

Harry Potter – the boy who had travelled back in time not to defeat him before a *thing* was birthed, but to – *to*… Tom's brain faltered, finding many plausible endings for his sentence but not one that described them all. To assist him, to show kindness to him, to be enigmatic and attractive and bold and incredible… to be desired by him.

Past midnight was an inappropriate time for a conversation, but Tom didn't care. Harry was impossible to be found when he didn't want to be found – and he'd made it clear by running away, by the disgust on his face, that he didn't want to be found. He was acting against Harry's clear wishes, but he didn't particularly care; this was his chance.

Tom walked through the Hogwarts grounds towards the Forbidden Forest, likely tracing the exact steps that Harry had taken ten minutes beforehand. The cold night air whipped through him, causing fingers and feet to go numb, but his brain was filled with half-formed swirling

thoughts, so he hardly noticed.

*

Harry wasn't surprised he couldn't sleep. He didn't really think he *deserved to* – he had just given Riddle, *Voldemort,* the keys to becoming undefeatable. *Keep horcruxes close, kill the time-travelling Harry Potter, and kill Harry Potter's predecessors,* in other words.

He couldn't think straight at all. In his original timeline, most of the awful situations he and his friends had found themselves in had been fault of brutal murderers, incompetent idiots or manipulative schemers. In this one, however, everything that would unfold from this point onwards – all the destruction Riddle, *Voldemort,* would wreak – would be entirely his fault.

He'd utterly, completely failed. He'd become a fool and had believed the words of someone he knew only wove lies. He'd become moronic, by allowing his temper and stupid, juvenile sense of betrayal to get the better of him. '*I'm a time-traveller',* he'd said, and now the entire world was going to pay for his mistake.

It was past midnight, but Harry couldn't care less. He took one envious glance at Ignatius Prewett's curtains – his friend was snoring lightly within his four-poster – and then he exited the Gryffindor seventh-year dormitory.

He couldn't do this anymore. He couldn't stay in a time period that wasn't his own. He couldn't stay in a castle of people who were so oblivious to the horrors that would befall them, to the terror that *would be his fault.* Call him a coward, but *he couldn't.* He'd fucked up irreversibly, and he just wanted to go *home.*

He'd crossed the schoolgrounds before he could put together any coherent plan of action. The ominous grey clouds had disappeared from the sky, leaving hundreds and hundreds of stars in their wake. Harry thought their twinkle was a mockery, a ridicule. They cared naught for his struggles, for the problems he'd caused, for the timeline he'd disrupted.

It was a cold winter's night, but he'd put on a jumper and his anxiousness had caused his heart to work overtime. As a result, he

barely felt the temperature or the breeze as he sought out the creatures that bizarrely reminded him of home – of Ron and Hermione and Neville and Ginny and Luna.

He only had to take a few dozen steps into the Forbidden Forest before he caught sight of a couple thestrals. He couldn't be sure, but he knew they were immensely loyal creatures, so he imagined that they'd come into the outskirts of the Forest because they knew he needed the company.

Maximillan was among the group. Harry reached out to run his hand through the tall thestral leader's silky mane, and admired the draconic features and stretched-thin translucent black skin. Eerie, deathly perhaps, but that was half the reason he found them so comforting. They *understood.*

Maximillan tilted a skeletal head at him, as if to question what was taking him so long. Harry sighed, worries burdening him, and reached into his pocket to grasp the Elder Wand. He didn't take it out, and instead merely murmured, "Death."

Wind whipped through the trees as if to greet the figure that materialised before him. Today, Death had chosen to wear Dumbledore's face – his aged one, beard and grey hairs and wrinkles and all.

Harry swallowed, not having expected that sight at all. He had very complicated feelings for Dumbledore, for both the one in the forties and the one he'd known in the nineties.

He knew why Death had chosen this face, however; it was the one who had sent him into depressing summer situations for six years straight. Death was going to say *no,* just as Dumbledore had said *no* to better living conditions. Harry spoke his request regardless.

"I want to go home."

"You are home," Death responded in raspy tones. Harry *hated* it; not only did it feel disrespectful to Dumbledore, who wasn't elderly and hadn't schemed his childhood away yet, but he *hated* being told untruths and half-truths. He'd already fallen folly to Riddle's untruths today, he didn't need *more.*

"I am *not,*" Harry emphasized. He whispered a 'sorry' to Maximillan when his combing of a silky mane accidently became a little aggressive with his frustration. "I love Hogwarts – but this *time period*

isn't my home. I want to see Ron and Hermione again. No – don't change into Ron's features, that's not what I meant and *you know it*."

Flaming red hair greyed again within a split-second.

"Young Master," Death replied. Dumbledore's hand outstretched and patted the neck of the closest thestral, a female who stood half a head shorter than Maximillan. Harry distinctly remembered he'd called her *'Apple'*, but he wasn't quite sure the reasoning behind it anymore. "I do not think you were at home, in your original timeline."

Harry opened his mouth to retort, but Death raised Dumbledore's hand to halt him. "You loved the people, that is undeniable. Yet you were not *at home.* They mourned and they began to move on, to rebuild. You may have gone out to all the funerals and all the celebratory events, you may have accepted odd jobs with the Auror's department, you may have gone to Muggle pubs with your year-mates, you may have accepted Narcissa Malfoy's invitations or tea at Malfoy Manor, you may have made deals with the Nimbus Racing Broom Company and consequently taken up a hobby of repairing and improving old broomsticks, but you did not move on."

"It sounds like I did," Harry bit back.

"One of your strengths is self-awareness."

Harry grimaced. "Alright. Fine. I didn't move on. I stayed in Grimmauld Place rather than buy a place of my own and I didn't pick up my relationship with Ginny again because I didn't know *how* to move onto a new chapter. *My entire life* has been war, even my childhood. The Dursley's felt like war. I don't know how to *exist*, outside of war."

Harry paused. Maximillan lowered his head until they were facing eye-to-eye. When he continued, it was the thestral that Harry spoke to, not to Death. He was uttering an apology.

"But 1943 certainly isn't my home, either. This entire timeline isn't my home. I want to go back to my original one."

Maximillan rubbed his snout across Harry's hand as if to express an understanding and a lack of offense taken.

"You want to abandon people that need you," Death replied. Dumbledore's visage had been an irritating one at several points during his life, but it had never been more infuriating than now.

Harry felt his face contorting. “I’m Teddy’s godfather,” he said. “My *godson* needs me.”

Death responded as though he hadn’t spoken. “You want to leave because you are afraid of the consequences of your actions.”

“*Damn fucking right,”* Harry retorted. “I’m the one who’s blindly fumbled through everyone else’s messes, so doesn't it follow that someone else cleans up the mess I’ve made? Turnabout is fair play.”

The moment it came out of his mouth, Harry knew he wasn’t going to follow through. While he had arguably been groomed into being selfless, into having a saviour complex, into becoming a martyr, they were all still parts of his character. He wouldn’t ever take the easy way out, if it meant defending and saving his friends – in whichever timeline that might be.

It seemed that his friends in this timeline would face a far greater threat from Riddle – *Voldemort* – than the one in his original timeline, now. That meant he was staying in this godforsaken timeline and sorting out the mess he’d created.

It wasn’t completely bleak and hopeless, though. He had options: he could try to Obliviate Riddle and try all over again, he could try to seize one of Riddle’s horcruxes and blackmail him with it, or he could wait it out and fight when the war – because it would undoubtedly come – first began to break out.

Harry glared at Death – at Dumbledore’s face. *Schemers* they were, both Dumbledore and Death. “I’m talking myself into treading down the path you want me on, aren’t I? I hate you.”

Death, once again, continued as though he hadn’t spoken. “Why have you assumed the worst?”

Harry blinked incredulously. “Now I’m wondering if we’re referring to the same person or not.”

Death raised one of Dumbledore’s eyebrows. It was uncanny, because Harry didn’t recall witnessing the actual Dumbledore ever doing that. “Of course we are. You are arguing for the sake of arguing. Playing the Devil’s advocate is the Muggle saying, I believe.”

Harry rubbed his forehead. His shoulder was then nudged by Maximillan’s lowered head, as if to offer encouragement.

“I’ll admit, I have cared for him since our similarities were pointed out – I have the debilitating weakness known as empathy,” Harry replied, derisively. “But I’ve had my care exploited. I cannot and will not stop caring for him and his fate, but assuming the best of him will never be a wise decision. I’ve made the mistake and I won’t do it again. I’ve already put enough at risk.”

It was alright when it was just him who risked finding himself on the end of an *Avada Kedavra.* He had a brother wand and could rely on the Priori Incantatem effect to bail him out once. However, it wasn’t just him who was endangered, anymore.

His predecessors in the Potter family likely had a target on their backs. Riddle had undoubtedly heard Voldemort call him ‘*Potter’* during his memory of their final battle.

The Weasleys were in danger, too. Riddle had seen an image of Ginny’s flaming red hair in the Chamber. It wouldn’t take him too long to connect the dots, Harry was sure; the trait was quite distinctive.

He’d *fucked up* by believing the best of Riddle, to say the least. A single minute was all it had taken. He wasn’t going to do it again.

“It is easy to forget your age,” Death replied, as though age had any meaning to an ageless concept. “I wish you did not have to bear the burdens of the world, young Master.”

Harry was surprised when he suddenly found himself wrapped in an embrace. It was a weird thing, to say the least. He felt the future body of Dumbledore shift around him, body becoming leaner. He watched grey hair becoming curly and black. Then, the body became pudgier and more feminine, and the hair became ginger.

“Stop doing that,” Harry said, swallowing thickly. It was as if Death was trying to figure out which body would be the most comfortable for him to embrace. The answer was none of them; it was not truly Dumbledore nor Sirius nor Molly whose arms were holding him. The attempt to portray the very human thing that was an embrace – a thing that Death likely did not understand – was appreciated, however. It was, as everyone said, the thought that counted.

“I still wish you would take me home, even it was just so I could spend Christmas at the Weasleys’,” Harry protested weakly. So he could truly be embraced by Molly Weasley. “I’d get a cosy new knitted sweater and Molly would tell me I look too thin although I’ve actually

put on some muscle, and even if I were eating a third serving of her treacle tart. George…" George would honour his twin's legacy by joking and pranking everyone twice as hard. "Arthur would ask some ridiculous question about Muggles. I'd spend half an hour answering every single one because he'd want to understand every nuance of my response. Ron would-"

Harry stopped because he'd heard a branch crack. Thestrals always moved eerily silently, and so too did Death. A sense of foreboding filling him, Harry spun around and out of Death's embrace. As he did so, the figure of Molly Weasley disappeared into thin air. The Elder Wand jumped out of his pocket and into his hand, as though it had a mind of its own.

*

Tom had expected thestrals, when he'd followed Harry into the Forbidden Forest. He'd not expected a *conversation,* however.

He'd honestly intended to turn away. That foreign, heavy emotion had filled him and told him he'd already done enough; he did not need to add eavesdropping to the list of his infractions within the last several hours. However, he'd heard Harry say *now I'm wondering if we're referring to the same person or not,* and he knew instinctively, and with complete certainty, that the topic had been *him.*

He'd stayed and listened. He'd not dared to look out from behind a tree and view the conversationalists in case he was spotted through his Disillusionment Charm; the charm always had tell-tale glimmers. He reasoned that if the conversation was about him, he had a right to know what was being discussed. At the very least, that was what he placated that emotion that had risen within him with.

Tom did not know what to do with what he had overheard.

I cannot and will not stop caring for him and his fate, Harry had said.

Such a foolish, beautiful sentence that was. Harry believed Tom had deceived him, it seemed, yet he still *cared* – cared about that writhing piece of soul he claimed would end up in 'Limbo, or whatever you wish to call it'. He *cared* 'since their similarities had first been pointed out', whatever that meant. He cared because he was an empathetic

fool... but he *cared.*

I-am-not-here-out-of-spite Harry had implied so before, but it was undoubtable now. Harry did not know Tom was listening, so there was no reason to lie. The straight and honest truth was that Harry, the boy who had been targeted by *(not him not him)* Lord Voldemort, cared about him unconditionally.

It was *so foolish,* but it was beautiful too. He was not sure that there were any others who cared of him at all, let alone unconditionally, and it made him *marvel.* What a wonder the Earth was, to evolve life so perfectly that Harry could exist.

Young Master, raspy tones had then said. Tom hadn't been sure what that, nor Harry's eventual reply of 'stop doing that', had meant. He had still been hiding behind a tree.

Then, the conversation had begun to get personal, relating to people *in the future* who Harry was evidently close to. He'd realised he could not stay any longer. They were no longer discussing him; it was none of his business. That heavy emotion had begun to drag him down even further.

Tom had stepped out, but his Disillusionment Charm had worn off during the time he'd been listening, as had the Silencing Charm he'd placed upon his feet. He'd stepped on a branch by accident, and he knew before he looked up that he'd been heard.

"Murdering in the back, now? And here I thought you couldn't stoop any lower."

Harry's voice was so cold, harsh, unforgiving – nothing like the words of *care* he had just spoken.

Tom motioned at the wand that had been raised at his face, trying to convey its lack of necessity. He felt incredibly uneasy with a weapon pointed at him, but he didn't want to do anything that might be perceived as aggression. He didn't want to make himself more distrustful in Harry's eyes.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked. The other speaker had the same raspy tones as voice he'd heard in the library, the day they'd met. Both times, the mysterious person had vanished peculiarly. There were clearly still things - *many things* - that he did not yet know about the green-eyed Gryffindor.

Harry didn't respond immediately. Instead, he looked up and down at Tom and assessed that there was no wand in his hand. He didn't lower his own wand, however.

"What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep, and then I saw you, and I-" Tom stopped, all explanations for any of his actions leaving his mind. "When does the Muggle war end?"

He did not know what possessed him to ask such a question. Perhaps it was Harry's eyes. They were remarkable; the darkness of the night and Forbidden Forest ate away at all the colours *except* for the green in Harry's eyes, somehow. They were also haunting; they were the same green eyes of an accusing boy from within his dreams.

Shock wove into onto Harry's features, followed by some unfathomable amalgamation of emotions. He lowered the wand slightly, perhaps unconsciously so, and replied, "1945."

1945, Tom thought. Somewhere between one and two years into the future, the war that had plagued his summers – and disturbed him even while safe behind Hogwarts' walls and wards – would end. He breathed in and out, heavily.

"Tell me," he requested. "What happens?"

Harry pursed his lips before replying. "I only attended Muggle primary school, so I don't remember much. I do recall the estimates of the number of Jews that were killed in concentration camps was somewhere in the millions. Hitler killed himself. The United States dropped two bombs – atomic bombs, they're far more deadly than normal bombs – on Japan, and thousands died. Hundreds of thousands, I think."

Given that Harry's wand was still pointed at his waist, Tom had not truly expected an answer, much less a detailed one.

He swallowed thickly. *Hundreds of thousands* – he could not even comprehend that scale of destruction, let alone *millions.* And the instigator of it all, who first declared war… "Hitler committed suicide? All of this – all of this… Just to kill himself, in the end?"

"Not a fan of Hitler?" Harry replied, dryly. "Funny, because there's many parallels I can draw between Lord Voldemort and Hitler. Believing in the supremacy of blood… that's rather similar to Hitler

and Nazi Germany's unfounded beliefs regarding the supposed *Aryan race.* Murdering entire villages of Muggles, murdering Muggleborns or dehumanising them or segregating them – that's awfully similar to what Hitler and Nazi Germany's done to Jews and other minorities. Raging war upon-"

"Stop," Tom implored.

"You're a fucking hypocrite, Riddle," Harry said.

"Tom," Tom said, trying to quell the urge to put his face in his hands. "I asked you to call me Tom."

"You're a fucking hypocrite, Tom," Harry repeated. "The question is: what happens when you've achieved everything you want? Once you've eradicated or oppressed all the minorities you hate or believe are below you, once you've obliterated everyone who opposes you? You and your followers are murderers, torturers, terrorists, oppressors, extremists, anarchists, cultists. They follow you because they *crave* violence, because schoolyard bullying wasn't enough for them - it wasn't *real* enough, wasn't *tormenting* enough, wasn't *destructive* enough. You lead them so far into a terrorising lifestyle and they can't turn back from it. How will you convince them, then, to take up the positions of shopkeepers and teachers and healers and diplomats and researchers and all the rest? Some will be willing and rational enough, I'm sure, and there's certainly many who'll follow you out of fear rather than bloodlust – but will all of them be willing to pull the weight of the society you've torn apart? Will *enough* of them be? What are you going to do, when you realise you rule over ruin? Or is that your *goal?* You want to reign over rubble?"

"I-" Tom struggled for words. His head was spinning with hundreds or thousands of half-formed thoughts, and his heart – so indifferent and callous most of the time – was churning in a sea of unfathomable emotion. One thought stood out from all the rest, however.

"I don't wish to become *him*," Tom said quietly. He witnessed disbelief flicker across Harry's expression. A derisive snort followed.

"Oh, I can certainly believe that. The question is: do you not want to become him because you've seen him *die,* or because you don't want to commit atrocities?"

Neither, Tom thought. *I don't want to see you killed, is the reason. Because I am immeasurably fond of you.* He struggled to say that aloud,

however.

“Does it matter?” Tom replied, “If the result is the same?”

“I think,” Harry said slowly. “If you have to ask a question like that, I already know the answer, and I think you already are him.”

“I am *not*,” Tom hissed, irritation giving him the boldness to speak more of the truth. “I’m not attacking you although you have your wand pointed at me. I’m not murdering you although you murdered me – *him.* I’m not – *I’m not* – I care about you.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Do you? Because what I’ve seen is that you’ll stalk me, you’ll deceive me, you’ll rape my mind. That isn’t care, Tom.”

Indignation and anger rose within him. “And what about *you?* I heard your conversation – you said you cared for me, yet you’re making presumptions and judgments of me. You said you couldn’t assume the best of me but that doesn’t mean you have to assume the worst of me.”

“I’m not assuming the worst of you,” Harry replied, and as if to prove it, he finally lowered his knobbly wand. “I’m asking the questions you can’t bear to ask yourself. I’m telling you what you desperately ignore. Answer those questions, stop avoiding self-reflection, because you *need* to face the truth of yourself, of your destructive and self-destructive desires, of your hypocrisy. Do that, and you’ll understand that I’m just trying to help you be better than the worst version of you.”

Those haunting green eyes stared into his, and Tom thought he already understood. Harry had failed to read between the lines and had misunderstood him, but his care was still evident. His words were still profound and his questions were still worthwhile answering.

And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. A preacher whom he knew to be a sanctimonious waste of flesh had told them all that one Sunday at Wool’s, but perhaps the verse itself was important. Lies were comforting while the truth was harsh, but the truth was a kindness. With the truth, informed decisions could be made, better choices could be taken.

“Okay,” he agreed. “I’ll think on it.”

Harry looked disbelieving but hopeful, and Tom knew he’d spoken the

right words and made the right decision.

He could show, by listening and reflecting, that he appreciated Harry's advice. He could show that he treasured Harry's opinion. He could prove that he truly did care for Harry in return.

Then, hopefully, they could overcome obstacles, seen and unforeseen, together. He could not bear it any other way.

Something silky against his hand. Tom nearly jumped when he turned around to see white, pupilless eyes staring at him. He shuddered as the thestral lowered its skeletal head and nudged his hand again, but he nevertheless followed the message and reached a hand out to pet a glossy mane.

"I think I remember why I called her 'Apple'," Harry said vacantly. When Tom dared to look at him, he noted that not even the Forbidden Forest could cast a shadow over the slight, hesitant smile on the Gryffindor's ever-enrapturing features.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter caused me a lot of agony... I have over 23k words in deleted scenes. I had a chapter of 10k and thought I was finally done with it, but yesterday I decided that everything was wrong with it, so I completely rewrote the whole thing from scratch... different plot and all. It ended up only being half as long, and it covers a very short period of time in the story, but I *think* it's much better...

Anyway...
Please leave a comment/kudo if you enjoyed the fruits of my labour...? <3

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

My bad for fudging the chapter count <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He looked like he'd had precisely three hours of sleep, which should be unsurprising given that it was the truth.

"-not there, not there, *Dolphy!"* Abraxas' voice reverberated from the dormitory into the bathroom. He let out a screech, which was followed by laughter.

Tom saw himself blink in the mirror, as if detached from his physical self. He had no idea what was going on in the dormitory, and he was too tired to muster much more than a grimace.

He had stayed in the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest with Harry and three thestrals after their conversation had officially ended, not wanting to leave alone and face his dreamscape again.

After some time had passed, Harry had announced he was going back. They'd walked to the castle together, in a silence that was not awkward but not quite companiable. They'd separated at the same fork in the corridor that they'd kissed at several hours beforehand. Tom had purposefully not looked at the boy before turning away. His desire would've crash into him like a tidal wave if he'd done so, and he couldn't bear another rejection.

Upon return to his dormitory, he'd slipped into a dreamless sleep. It was a blessing.

Still, three hours of sleep was nowhere near the five or six he required to function *minimally,* let alone the seven or eight he needed to function *optimally*. He was going to need a triple shot in his long black today.

"Stop, stop – *please,* Dolphy, I'll let you use my mirror-"

Tom closed his eyes and sighed. Of *course*. All this noise at the unreasonable time of seven in the morning was because Randolph wanted to use Abraxas's vanity mirror.

It was a magical mirror; it had a little face carved in the centre top of its ornate silver frame and talked. Admittedly, Tom used it whenever Abraxas was absent or asleep. They all did. It was unlike most magical mirrors in the sense that it complimented whoever looked upon it rather than insulted them.

Tom contemplated barging out into the dormitory and demanding that he use Abraxas's mirror too. His appearance looked so *messy* and it was an insult to the pride and elegance that he wore the rest of the day. He'd appreciate something inflating his ego.

Of course, he wouldn't be doing that, because it would hurt his ego further if he all but admitted he wanted his ego fed.

Tom grimaced at himself. He hated useless circular thoughts almost as much as he hated the bedhead he was currently sporting. How did Harry manage to make his crow's nest of hair look *good?* The Gryffindor's hair was always more dishevelled than his was currently, yet it always looked artful.

He pulled at a wild lock of hair, and after a long, deep sigh, he began his morning routine in earnest. The sooner he left the bathroom, the sooner he could leave the dormitory, and the sooner he could escape whatever nonsense his dormmates were engaging in. It seemed that Clyde and Viridian had joined in, too, because Randolph had just told them both to 'shove off' and 'get their own mirror'… which. Well. Hypocrisy at its finest.

Hypocrisy.

The word hung over him heavily, taunting him. He could still hear it echoing in his mind when he exited the dormitory a full twenty minutes later.

Harry had called him a hypocrite.

He shouldn't care what others thought of him. He hadn't, historically. Other's opinions would never matter in the grand of scheme of things, because nothing would anyone said or believed would have the slightest impact on the *power,* on the *greatness* he would achieve and wield.

Harry was the exception to all rules. It *bothered* him as much as it enchanted him.

Harry was a *weakness,* because Tom had grown fond of him. Harry

was *causing* weakness, because Harry kept *influencing* him, kept arising foreign emotions within him.

He was exactly why Tom had always wanted to remain independent and friendless.

Yet. Harry provided invaluable insight, and he did not feel weakened by the Gryffindor's influence whatsoever.

It was, frankly, ridiculous. Harry was his archenemy, his downfall – in another timeline, in other circumstances. Yet, it did not seem like Harry wanted to render him powerless, as archenemies tended to wish. Rather, it felt like Harry was trying to empower him. *I'm trying to help you be better than the worst of you,* he had said.

He was so *odd.*

He was so *awful.*

When Tom looked at him, he saw someone *powerful.* His power was so different to the power Tom had thought he craved; it was even more intangible, an unimaginable inner strength. He found himself esteeming Harry far more than he'd ever respected anyone in more traditional seats of power, which was utterly *awful, terrifying.* What did that say for his future prospects, if his definition of power changed?

Stop avoiding self-reflection, Harry had said. Self-reflection had not even been a word in his vocabulary until Harry had uttered it.

Now that it *was* one, however, he would very much like to avoid it. It was *painful,* it was chilling, and it was *confronting.*

Hypocrite, Harry had said.

"My Lord…" Abraxas said uneasily.

"*What?"* Tom snapped. He hadn't even realised that his dormmates had joined him at the breakfast table until then.

"We just wondered- you've been quiet this morning, and we wanted to know if you were going to join us for winter solstice."

Abraxas' voice wavered with every word. It could not be more obvious that the blonde was anxious – terrified, even.

"Of course," Tom replied with saccharine sweetness in his voice. "I

wouldn't miss it for the world."

Abraxas visibly swallowed, while Randolph sat down opposite him. It struck him as incredibly strange; the brunette's hand was trembling slightly, a reminder of the cruel curse Tom had cast at him only the day beforehand.

Harry's words reverberated in his brain once more. *You lead them so far into a terrorising lifestyle and they can't turn back from it.*

He was witnessing that, right now. Not their inflictions of terror, but the second half of that sentence. Abraxas was afraid but would not walk away for fear that would make everything worse, and because he foolishly hoped Tom's ninety-eight-percent persona was his true character. Meanwhile, Randolph was suffering the after-effects of the Cruciatus but he was so caught up in a web of blackmail that it would be impossible for him to escape. Not that he even *wanted* to; Tom had so successfully manipulated him into barring his loyalty eternally.

He was witnessing how much he'd already sank his teeth into them. He could see Harry's prediction – Harry's truth – unfold perfectly clearly. A little more fear, a little more torture, a little more blackmail, a little more promise regarding blood purity and practice of the Dark Arts, a little more of this and that, and they *would* terrorise the world if he gave the order.

It was exactly what he'd wanted. It was exactly how he'd planned.

What happens when you've achieved everything you want?

Tom wanted to scream at the memory of Harry's voice. He wanted to scream *because he was not satisfied.* He was watching Abraxas and Randolph behave exactly how he'd wanted – more or less, they were still annoying – yet *he was not satisfied.*

What are you going to do once you've eradicated or oppressed all the minorities you hate or believe are below you, once you've obliterated everyone who opposes you?

He didn't know.

What are you going to do, when you realise you rule over ruin?

He didn't *know,* because he had simply wanted to reign without restriction. He wanted power above any other, because so much of his life had been controlled by outside forces. He wanted to take back all

that control he'd been denied, and he wanted to be just as harsh as the world had been to him. He wanted *revenge.*

But that was all abstract, intangible, theoretical. It was easy to say he wanted unlimited power when he didn't fully understand what that meant.

When it started to become *real, material, quantifiable* – when Harry started to name the price – he realised that there were lines that he was unwilling to cross in his quest for power and revenge.

Hypocrite.

He did not want to be a hypocrite.

Nazi Germany and their *Wehrmacht* had bombed London and *taunted, tormented, tortured* him with his mortality. They had haunted his dreams and even his waking moments. If he were ever able to draw a parallel between himself and Hitler, between his ideals and Nazism, then he had become what he most despised.

Tom abruptly placed down his half-finished teacup of coffee. It had stopped being perfectly piping hot several minutes ago anyway. Abraxas turned wide and fearful eyes on him, Randolph's hand tremor became worse, likely unconsciously, and a few other Slytherins surrounding him looked up.

"My Lord?"

"Is… is everything alright, my Lord?"

Tom ignored Abraxas and Randolph in favour of standing up and assessing the one long table that the remaining students and staff ate at in the holidays. It took him half a second to conclude that Harry wasn't present.

"Everything's perfect," Tom lied. "None of you happened to sight Henry Evans this morning, have you?"

He received a mixture of expressions in response: questioning, angered, confused, blank. He was unappreciative of all of them, but he supposed they were to be expected. It must sound peculiar to hear the Heir of Slytherin – not that he had ever *explicitly* confirmed it, that wouldn't be sly nor subtle, and it would be incredibly damning – looking for a Gryffindor.

“I can search for him,” Randolph offered.

Tom frowned at him. After witnessing his simmering hostility towards Harry twice yesterday, Tom doubted the brunette had any good intentions.

He rested his gaze upon Randolph’s shaking hand until he noted the boy’s Adam’s apple bobbing. With his message hopefully received, Tom fixed a smile upon his face and said, “That’s unnecessary.”

He strode out of the Great Hall. He had no clear destination in mind; finding Harry was like trying to catch smoke with his bare hands.

*

“Fuck, it’s fucking cold,” Ignatius Prewett said the morning of Christmas Eve. It had snowed the night before, and the temperature certainly reflected that.

“And *you’re* the one who insisted on dragging us outside,” Harry muttered, hugging his arms for extra warmth. He gazed out at the Hogwarts lawn, which was now covered in a thick white blanket.

“You’re an ass, Nate,” Lucretia Black agreed, laughing lightly. Harry averted his gaze as she leaned over to peck her boyfriend on the cheek.

Sometimes, they reminded him painfully of Ron and Hermione. Not by appearance or personality, although Nate was Ron’s great uncle, but by the fact that they were completely devoted to each other.

“Careful of the blushing virgin, Lucy,” Nate replied. He was walking in the centre of the three of them, and so he draped an arm over each of their shoulders.

“Shut up,” Harry retorted, shoving his friend’s side. “I’m not voyeuristic. I think I need bleach for my eyes, most days.”

“Bleach?” Nate questioned, pausing his stride and turning to Harry. “Wait, Henry, why don’t you have a scarf? Stand in the middle of us, it’ll be warmer.”

Without waiting for approval, he switched their places. Harry wasn’t

complaining, it really was warmer in the middle.

They truly *did* remind him of Ron and Hermione. They never made him feel left out although he was perpetually the third wheel.

“Bleach is a Muggle cleaning or whitening product,” Harry explained, wondering if bleach even existed in the 1940s. “And Tom Riddle has my scarf.”

Their walk stopped once again, two pairs of eyes looking at him in a mixture of confusion and surprise.

“Riddle?” Lucy asked. “I didn’t know you were friends.”

Harry winced. It was unsurprising that she had no idea that none of Riddle’s circle were friends, but rather sycophants. She was a Slytherin, but she wasn’t involved with him whatsoever. More of an outcast, really, ever since she’d publicly announced her relationship with Nate.

“I’ve seen Henry talk to him a few times,” Nate filled in, though there was still a question on his face.

Harry rubbed his forehead. There was no possible way to accurately and succinctly describe his involvement with Riddle. Archnemesis didn’t fit in this timeline, but neither ex-archnemesis nor acquaintance captured their relationship quite correctly, either.

“We’re not friends,” was the only thing he could think of to say. Riddle didn’t *have* friends, and if he did… well, Harry thought it was far more likely that he was on Riddle’s hitlist.

“It’s one of those ‘it’s complicated’ situations?” Lucy asked.

“You have no idea.”

“Huh. I didn’t realise you liked men.”

Harry froze. Uncle Vernon had been a Tory and had thrown around a lot of words regarding ‘abnormal store clerks’ and the ‘abnormal couple down the road’, so he had a habit of tensing whenever sexuality was mentioned.

He searched both of his friend’s faces for disgust of hostility and found none. It wasn’t entirely unsurprising; the wizarding world came with its own set of prejudices and cared less about Muggle ones.

“It’s not complicated *like that*,” Harry said, and then closed his eyes, regretfully. “Well, it is, but it’s-”

Gods, he’d been so stupid to believe Riddle, even for a minute. He *knew* Riddle was a pathological liar, but he’d still let Riddle *kiss* him, and he’d *enjoyed it*. It was so disturbing and distressing to think about, though not as much as the knowledge that he’d *spilled his secrets, too*.

It had been a couple of days since they’d last spoken, and Harry wondered what on Earth Riddle was planning. Nothing good, he didn’t think.

Harry considered himself the world’s biggest idiot. *Self-reflect,* he’d said, as if Voldemort had ever listened to anyone.

“Complicated,” Lucy and Nate finished together.

“I like girls too,” Harry protested, determined to throw his thoughts away from Riddle. He could do for a Christmas without worries, for once in his life.

“I’m flattered?”

Nate released his grasp around Harry’s shoulder and rounded on him, mock anger written on his face. “You’re *flirting* with my fiancé?”

“Piss off, both of you,” Harry replied, now more at ease by the banter. He scooped up a handful of snow to throw right into Nate’s face.

The look of complete indignation he received was enough to make him double over laughing – at least, until snow was thrown back at him.

“You’re both idiots,” Lucy said. She laughed at them, only to receive both of their next handfuls of snow. “*Oi!*”

“That’s what you get-” Harry jumped away from an impossibly large snowball that had been thrown his way. “Hey, using magic is cheating!”

Their snowball fight increased in intensity from there, every man and woman for themselves. They stumbled through the snow, attempting to dodge each hit and squealing when they didn’t succeed. It was childish, but none of them particularly cared. It was *fun,* and that was what mattered.

Harry found himself laughing although the chill was beginning to get to his bones. It was things like this that made him feel like perhaps he *was* at home, a shocking revelation. Home had always been a tricky thing to conceptualise, for him.

Another magically-enlarged snowball was thrown, this time in Nate's direction. He spluttered, unable to dodge it in time. With an indignant look at his smirking girlfriend, he said, "You know, I dragged you both outside because I wanted to make a snowman. Properly. *Without* magic."

"Sore loser," Lucy said, but nevertheless pocketed her wand.

"Sore loser," Harry agreed, but plunged his gloved hands into the snow once more and began to roll a ball through the snow.

Ten minutes later, they observed a slightly disproportionate snowman. They had to conjure sticks and buttons for it after all, but overall, Harry thought it was a job well done.

Then, sound of snow being trodden on underfoot could be heard over the light wind.

"Henry Evans."

Harry jolted. The voice wasn't the same, not high and cold, and the name he'd been called was different too. Yet, it somehow sounded exactly like Voldemort's musing in the Forbidden Forest, just before an *Avada Kedavra* had been uttered.

"Good morning, Riddle," Lucy said. "Henry tells us you've got his scarf."

Riddle smiled at her, and Harry internally winced. It was difficult to tell the sincerity of Riddle's actions when they were focused on him, but he could easily discern that expression as entirely ingenuine.

"Do you need something?" he asked, perhaps a little more forcefully than was wise. Riddle's gaze immediately snapped over to his, but Harry didn't particularly care. Attention on him, poor as it may be, was better than it being on his friends.

"I'd like to borrow some of your time," Riddle answered, and smiled again. "And I suppose I can return your scarf."

Harry grimaced, but failed to think up any valid excuse. He also rather

wanted his scarf back. “Alright,” he said, and fell into step beside Riddle.

“Make sure you return Henry, too!” Nate called behind them.

“Interesting bunch, your friends,” Riddle commented once they were out of earshot.

“Oh, please. You hate them.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

It wasn’t a good sign that Harry already felt exhausted from the conversation. Trying to discern every little nuance from Riddle’s words always felt like swimming against the world’s strongest currents: impossible. If he *didn’t,* though, he’d be washed away, head under water, drowning.

“What did you want?”

Riddle paused, one foot above the other on the steps to the Entrance Hall. He turned, and Harry swallowed when he saw the look in the boy’s eyes.

He’d looked exactly like that – albeit older – when he’d set his gaze upon Slytherin’s Locket. *Hungry, greedy.* It meant he would ensure that everything went his way.

It was the same expression Harry had received when they’d taken a second to breathe after kissing, only not quite as intense. There was no flickering of red within his irises this time, though Harry thought it was close call.

“There are several things I want, Harry Potter…” Riddle said softly, and Harry’s brain conjured an image of the Forbidden Forest once again. *Harry Potter… the Boy-Who-Lived. Come to die.*

He shuddered.

“It is an entirely frustrating task to find you,” Riddle continued, ever-so-conversationally, giving Harry whiplash. He continued up the stairs like nothing had happened at all. “Even the portraits and ghosts were entirely unhelpful.”

“My apologies?”

Riddle chuckled, a sound that seemed authentic but was probably

underscored by all the wrath and violence in nine circles of hell. Harry couldn't tell, and that inability was beginning to be a serious problem.

"It matters not, I've found you now," Riddle said. "First and foremost, I should clarify that I never intended to deceive you."

Harry couldn't help himself from snorting derisively. "Sure. That's why you're wearing part of your soul around your finger."

Riddle stilled, so momentarily that it was almost imperceptible, and then turned to put his burning gaze on Harry's once more.

"I have meant *every single word* I have told you. I made it the same night as Slughorn's supper date-"

"So, you didn't even *bother* to listen to me."

"-and I will admit," Riddle said, raising his voice to speak over the top of him, "It was a decision fuelled by spite and anger. I realised it was irrational. That it was what you had warned me against, and I realised everything else you were saying likely had merit, too. I did not lie to you when I said you were convincing. I will not split my soul further."

Harry stared for a long moment. Eventually, he said, "And I'm supposed to believe that? You've a nasty history *and* future of not listening and lying and splitting your soul and just generally being terrible."

"Which brings me to the second thing I wanted to speak with you about," Riddle replied, far more nonchalantly than Harry had expected. "I told you before, in the Forbidden Forest-"

Come to die, Harry's brain supplied, but obviously that wasn't the scene Riddle was referring to. Distantly, he wondered how Riddle would react if Harry told him he *had* succeeded in murdering his archnemesis, for a hot minute. Would he be gleeful? Or would he be enraged, because it hadn't been permanent?

"-that I am not Lord Voldemort. I do not intend to become him, either. He is not my present or future."

"Well," Harry remarked. "That'd be nice."

Riddle's jaw twitched. "I'm not speaking empty words, Harry. I have done as you requested. I have self-reflected. Do you know what I think of what I have seen, of what you have told me?"

Harry stared. Riddle's expression was so intensely… *indignant*, that it was not entirely far-fetched to believe that he truly had self-reflected - or done what he thought it was, at least.

"I think he was *pathetic."*

Riddle had spat the words so loudly and aggressively that a few portraits on the walls near them began to pay attention to their conversation. Riddle glared at a particularly excitable portrait, that of Valletta the Vivacious, and muttered the incantation for a privacy ward. He then continued, picking up their pace along Hogwarts' first-floor corridors once again.

"To torture and humiliate someone already at his mercy simply because he wanted to bump his self-esteem – how *pathetic,* that is. I am glad you escaped, that you embarrassed him by throwing of his Imperius."

"You know what's really ironic about that?" Harry commented. "You had one of your Death Eaters impersonate-"

"What in Salazar's name is a Death Eater?"

Harry blinked, momentarily distracted. "You don't call your sycophants 'Death Eaters'?"

Riddle frowned, seemingly displeased. "Of course not. I find that quite distasteful, actually. I have no cannibalistic tendencies."

"Right, well, that's a relief," Harry muttered. "Anyway, you had one of your followers impersonate one of our professors. He was obsessively devoted to you, but it was him who taught me to throw off the Imperius. All in all, not the worst Defence teacher I've had – trying to kill me at the end of the year is really par for the course."

"You had a Defence professor cast the Imperius Curse on you *and* try to kill you, and that *wasn't* the worst?"

Harry smiled nastily. "Dolores Umbridge, though she never tried to kill me-" *just suck my soul out-* "-was probably the worst… which is really saying something. She was the Senior Undersecretary and tried to get me expelled for underaged magic in the summer before fifth year, even though I'd been attacked by Dementors. So imagine my utter displeasure when I saw her sitting in the place of our Defense professor a month later."

Riddle gaped at him. "*Dementors?* Isn't that strange, for them not to be guarding Azkaban?"

"You would think," Harry muttered, sardonically. He'd seen possibly thousands of Dementors in his mere eighteen years of life, and none of them had been around Azkaban. "Anyway, I later found out – when she was really enraged and tried to cast the Cruciatus at me – that it was her who'd sent them after me."

Riddle had stopped walking again. "She was the one who…"

Harry had an urge to scratch the faint white scaring on his hand, to tear out the words with jagged fingernails.

It was not even that he particularly cared for the scars. Rather, he felt violated. It was an awful, grimy sensation that *clung* to his skin, to his *soul*, one that nothing could wash off.

"Yes," Harry said, irritably, and continued walking along the corridor, not wanting to discuss the topic any further.

"Well," Riddle replied carefully, "I see what you meant when you said education declined. Merrythought almost sounds good in comparison."

Merrythought was absolutely lovely, actually. Maybe a little old and forgetful – she was retiring for a reason – but she actually put effort into her lessons, was a competent witch, and wasn't entirely terrible at handling a class.

"It's actually your fault," Harry responded, unable to cool his temper entirely. "You cursed the Defence post when Dumbledore rejected your application, and no teacher could stay on for over a year after that. I got a revolving door of fools or sadists, or both."

With one exception, of course. Perhaps two. Snape had teetered on the edge of sadistic constantly, but he'd also saved Harry's life several times, so it probably evened out.

"From a tactical perspective, I can understand that," Riddle mused. "Leaving the Defence Against the Dark Arts education in shambles is a sure way to ensure no one can fight against a rising Dark Lord."

"Well, you're certainly right about that," Harry said angrily. "My friends realised at some point during the war that half the Ministry couldn't even cast a shield charm. It's honestly embarrassing, and it

only set them up for-"

"Harry," Riddle attempted to placate. "That doesn't mean I *agree* with the decision. Poor education is what spawns ignorance, bigotry-"

"You're one to fucking talk about *bigotry*. Maybe the rest of the school'll desperately ignore that Acromantulas can't Petrify, but *I* know you set a *Basilisk* on Muggleborns. Petrified them, and killed them. It's frankly impressive, and I mean that in the most derogatory way possible, just how bigoted you are."

Riddle looked at him, and Harry thought he probably should've stopped speaking if he wanted to keep his breath. His self-preservation instincts had never been the best.

"Warren was a mistake." Riddle's response was calm. His complete nonchalance regarding someone's *life* was utterly appalling, but admittedly not unsurprising. "I don't expect you to understand, but my decision to open the Chamber of Secrets was multi-faceted-"

"*Bigoted, idiotic, cruel* – there you go!"

"It was all those, too," Riddle said quietly. "You are correct, and you are correct that I am a hypocrite for it. In the Muggle world, I hate a fascist regime that has eugenic ideologies, yet in the wizarding one, I have subscribed to similar unfounded beliefs. I planned to be a dictator, not entirely unlike the one I so despise. But, I have done as you suggested. I have self-reflected, and I do not plan so any longer."

Riddle stopped a corridor away from where Harry knew the entrance of the Slytherin Common Room to be. "Wait here, I'll be a few minutes."

Harry considered divulging that he'd been into the snake's den before and therefore there was no need to conceal its entrance from him, but decided the better of it. He nodded instead, and then watched Riddle's retreating figure, trying to pull the fact from fiction in the Slytherin's words.

It was a nigh impossible task.

Riddle's disgust towards his counterpart had seemed authentic, but was that just because Voldemort had died, and he was very good at displacing feelings and manipulating words?

Harry began to pace slowly, back and forth along the width of the

corridor, lost in thought.

No one enjoyed being told they were a hypocrite. Yet, Voldemort had surely realised his hypocrisy at some point and decided he didn't care, because it was all in the name of power. *There is only power, and those too weak to seek it,* he had believed. How could Harry say, with one hundred percent certainty, that Riddle did not believe the exact same?

He couldn't, that was the answer.

Even if he *did* believe that Riddle had no intentions to become Voldemort or follow any of his footsteps whatsoever, he had no regard for any life but his own. His reasoning for not becoming Voldemort wouldn't be because he cared for other people, cared to *not* commit atrocities, but because he had concerns with his self-perception.

No matter the time, no matter the name, the egocentric beliefs were fundamental to his character.

Harry sighed. Wishing Riddle would ever be a good person was a wish wasted, but just a *few* scruples surely wasn't too much to ask for.

It probably was. He could always hope, though.

Hope foolishly, have your hope exploited, the untrusting sector of his brain supplied. It was sector that still felt like it had been betrayed, although Riddle *apparently had no intentions to deceive him by kissing him.*

Harry did not know what to do with that information.

Agitated, he pinched the bridge of his nose. His glasses jolted upwards with the action, then fell on his thumb and forefinger.

"I see my absence has distressed you."

Harry stopped pacing immediately, wondering how he'd been so lost in thought that he hadn't heard footsteps. He really needed to be more alert.

He turned to meet the gaze of sharp, dark brown eyes. "Quite the opposite, I assure you."

"I see my presence relaxes you."

"That's a contrapositive statement, not the opposite," Harry muttered, and had a sudden, vivid fantasy of tearing his own earlobes out with

his bare hands.

If he couldn't hear Riddle, then there would be no need to continually attempt to figure out the motivations behind the boy's words. Ignorance was bliss, or something – though, in a very circular thought that took him back to square one, Harry admitted it really wouldn't be. Not with Riddle.

"*Contrapositive*," Riddle repeated, chuckling lightly. It was a slightly disturbing sound. "There's a word you don't hear in conversation often, if at all."

"I made the mistake of looking in an Arithmancy textbook once."

While on the run, half-starved and freezing and in the middle of fucking nowhere and with one of my best friends who-knows-where and while desperate for any sort of information to speed up the process of finding wayward soul pieces belonging to a tyrant who was a plague upon the world, he didn't add. He didn't like to think about those days much.

Perhaps something showed on his face, because Riddle didn't question any further. He only uttered, "Ah," and held out Harry's Gryffindor scarf.

"Thanks." Harry wrapped the scarf around his neck, not bothering to do it up properly since inside the castle was far warmer than outside, and noted that Riddle was frowning at him.

"What must I do to make you believe me?"

"You can't *make* people do things."

"Do you pick apart everyone's words, or am I simply special?"

Gods, the narcissism was off the charts. Harry didn't know if he wanted to shove Riddle's face into the stone wall behind him and inform the boy that the world didn't revolve around him because he was alarmingly attracted to the arrogant asshole or because he was furious.

However, he'd resolved to expel his anger through less violent means following the war. He wasn't particularly remorseful over the fact that he had cast the Cruciatus at Amycus Carrow for spitting at Professor McGonagall – he had also been a Death Eater, a torturer of children as young as eleven and a murderer, after all – but Harry didn't want to become the sort of person whose anger got the better of him.

“I can’t forget who I’m talking to,” he settled with replying.

“Then, *remember* instead,” Riddle said, silkily. Apparently he’d fetched Harry’s scarf along with all the seductive allure in the world. He took an obnoxious step forward, and Harry found himself backed against the cold stone behind him in an attempt to regain personal space.

A hand reached out, and he remembered Riddle tracing a gentle thumb across his jawline, almost as if he *cared-*

Harry stopped the hand half-way through the air. He let out a sigh of relief too soon, because then Riddle entwinned their fingers.

“You believed me before, and I have not deceived you since then,” Riddle continued, voice soft. He’d somehow gotten closer without Harry noticing, because his body was *right there-* “Let me jog your memory, darling.”

Fuck, Harry thought. *Fuckfuckfuck.* It wasn’t a wonder at all that Hepzibah Smith had been so taken by Tom Riddle that she’d shown him all her worldly possessions. It wasn’t a wonder that so many people had joined a terrorist organisation in the making, when this was how Riddle behaved before he’d looked terrifyingly inhuman.

“Stop,” he croaked. He half-expected Riddle to continue trying – and succeeding, really – to seduce him, so he was surprised when Riddle took a step back. Their hands were still clasped, however, and Harry couldn’t find it in himself to let go.

Riddle’s hands were cold and could use the warmth, Harry reasoned. It was not a good reason, and his brain was scrambling. Eventually, however, he found some sort of coherent thought and grabbed onto it like it was a lifeline.

“You used Legilimency against me,” Harry said, voice slightly less shaky than a moment ago. “You still broke the trust I placed in you.”

“I don’t regret it,” Riddle replied, and Harry wondered if that was the first truth of the day. “It has given me great insight on who I do not want to become, and it has allowed me to see just a little of your strength.”

His gaze roved Harry’s figure. “So human you are, yet so strong.”

“Humanity isn’t a weakness.”

“Did I say it was?” Riddle questioned, as though the word 'yet' wasn't indicative of his feelings on the matter.

Or, perhaps, Harry considered, he *did* pick apart Riddle's words too much.

“I see strength in you that I do not see in myself; I see bravery in you that ten thousand men together do not have. Yes, perhaps I once wished to remove myself from humanity, thinking it to be a weakness – but now I realise I had merely seen the worst of us. I had only seen the hateful, the cowards, the hypocrites and the betrayers. I had not yet seen the kind, the brave, the truthful and the faithful. But I have, now. You have changed my perspective.”

“How?” Harry questioned, disbelieving. “I’ve only argued with you.”

“You have done so much more than that,” Riddle murmured. “You had the knowledge to utterly destroy me. You could’ve killed me. You could’ve ruined my reputation and sent me to the Wizengamot, with your knowledge of the Chamber of Secrets. You could’ve handed a horcrux to the Wizengamot as proof of murder. I could’ve been Kissed. You could’ve done so many things, but you chose not to. You’ve given me a chance, you have given me the truth, and that is kind, brave and faithful all in one. I wouldn’t dare waste your gifts.”

Harry stared and found himself reordering many thoughts in his attempt to unscramble his brain.

Dumbledore had believed Riddle was incapable of feeling or experiencing or understanding love because he was conceived under a love potion. He believed Riddle had been hard-wired from birth to be brutal, materialistic, apathetic.

Harry had never truly accepted that. Riddle *was* those three adjectives, but he was of the opinion that the boy was a product of his harsh circumstances. He’d grown up in an orphanage in the Great Depression; it would’ve been tooth-and-bone, no kindness shown whatsoever. He couldn’t have possibly learnt love in a situation like that.

Harry certainly hadn’t, in his own abysmal circumstances. It was only when he’d entered the wizarding world, and had been shown love and kindness, that he had truly learnt.

Riddle hadn’t been cheerily received by a Weasley family, however. Dumbledore had shown him suspicion where he should’ve been

welcoming, and Slytherin House wouldn't have treated the apparent Muggleborn any better than the dirt beneath their feet.

Riddle had become distrustful, independent, calculating, because he would've *had* to, to survive in that climate. He had raised himself and he would've been proud of what he raised – of course he would. He had survived and then thrived, he was incredibly intelligent and had an aristocratic air about him even though he had been a penniless orphan from the backwaters of London. He had *no reason* to understand love or kindness when he had survived many years without it, when he hadn't needed it to get him to where he was.

It wasn't a wonder that Voldemort had thought Dumbledore's declarations of love usurping Dark Magic utterly inane – it would've simply seemed hypocritical. It *was* hypocritical. Dumbledore had shown no love to Tom Riddle yet expected him to see the worth of it.

Something had changed, however. There *was* a small, thin vein of compassion underlying Riddle's words that Harry would've never expected. It struck a chord of hope within him; it threw Dumbledore's theory down the drain, and it certainly was very far removed from Voldemort.

Harry looked at Riddle. He traced aristocratic cheekbones and sharp jawlines with his eyes, and he took in the earnest expression. This was probably the most open Riddle had ever been with someone, and the layers of suspicion within him started to peel back.

'Riddle', he had called the boy in his mind for so long. It had been a way to distance himself from someone whom a misconception of over-familiarity meant certain doom. Yet, if Harry *could believe him,* if Riddle *had* made any small but genuine change for the better, then he really should be honouring the boy's twice-made request – 'call me Tom'.

Tom wasn't a good person by any means, but he did have a heart, if he could appreciate humanity. He had denounced his own hypocrisy and thus his bigotry, had denounced *Voldemort,* had said he wouldn't tear at his soul any longer. Harry, fool or not, decided he believed every word he had spoken.

Tom had done some abhorrent, unforgettable things already, but there was an entire future ahead. Harry thought that there was hope – and quite a lot of it – for him yet.

"I'm glad to hear it," Harry said. He looked down at their hands – still

clasped, still with fingers entwinned. His gaze didn't go unnoticed; Tom followed with his own, and then disentangled them, hands falling to his sides. He wore a forlorn expression.

"Please come to my birthday party," Tom requested. "You never RSVP'd."

Harry laughed, caught off-guard by the sudden change in tone and conversation. "The guest list is probably my worst nightmare," he commented. "But, okay."

Harry had seen him smile in all manner of ways. Usually, the expression served to not enhance his handsome features, but reminded a well-trained eye that there existed inhumanity within a human shell.

This time when Tom smiled, it was an expression that humanised him, and Harry didn't question the sincerity of it.

Chapter End Notes

Harry's trust issues has caused two weeks of continual head-scratching from me. I couldn't figure out if the large amount of his POV was dissonant, but I don't want to keep this chapter in my drafts forever so... here it is. in the wooly wild of the world wide web. 💔💔💔💔

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter regardless. Comments and kudos are appreciated as always <3

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the age of five, Tom had overheard their Sunday school preacher drunkenly call them all ‘fatherless runts’ to a similarly drunken Mrs. Cole, despite having preached not three hours ago that God was the Father of the fatherless.

That day, he had learnt that trust was merely a weapon for liars to wield against the naïve. He had never trusted blind words of faith again. He had never *trusted* again.

It seemed to him, for nearly twelve years, that his decision had been incredibly sound. He had been confronted by the harsh realities of the world time and time again, had been shown nothing but hatred, suspicion, or bigotry since that point forwards. There had never been anyone *for* him to trust; there was not a day that he did not look upon his now-followers and not remember that they had once scorned and belittled him for what was mistruth.

Tom had not anticipated that a green-eyed boy with distressingly alluring messy hair would lead him to question so many of his ingrained beliefs. He had not expected to find himself face-to-face with an enemy from the future who acted in opposition to everything that '*enemy*' was supposed to mean. He had not expected to be shown kindness or care, nor had he expected that a genuine, sunny smile would become more important to him than words could describe.

That smile of Harry's, present now after Tom had spoken openly and honestly for one of the first times ever, was indicative of some level of trust being regained. By his own beliefs, it should be a weapon for him to wield.

Tom found himself questioning that belief, however. Trust - specifically, *Harry's trust* - was a gift to be cherished. It was a compliment greater than all the flattery in the world. It was something that he never could imagine abusing, despite his long history of manipulation.

Not only that, but he found himself reciprocating the trust and not thinking himself naïve for it. Harry was not some hypocritical

preacher from Wool's. He was not any of the many purebloods who had scorned his eleven-year-old self upon arrival in Slytherin for his second-hand supplies, for his apparent blood status and relative naivety. He was instead someone who offered *help,* despite being one of the few people that would be completely justified in immediately condemning him.

Harry had mocked him, yes, but for the things that he could change, that he *should change;* not for the things that he could not help. Harry had been attentive to his vague mentions of Wool's and the Muggle war. He could *relate,* though Tom did not like to remember why that was. Harry was a brilliant, bright, exceptional boy that deserved so much; the least Tom could do was offer him trust in return, honesty and hope in return.

"I have something to show you," he volunteered.

"Your party's guest list?" Harry asked, eyebrows furrowed.

Tom allowed a smile to grace his lips. He had long since trained himself out of unconscious actions, fearing anything less than completely deliberate would destroy the immaculate mask he presented to the world. There was something sweet about watching Harry's unconscious actions, however. The boy had an air of authenticity that he could never manage.

"That wasn't what I was referring to, but I suppose I could fetch that from my trunk," Tom mused.

He made no motion to move, however. The trust that Harry had just instilled in him felt fragile. He did not want to turn around and leave, lest it break in his momentary absence.

"Don't bother, I'm sure I can picture it alarmingly well," Harry said, a wry smile on his face. "Everyone *but* the three tolerable people in your House."

"I'm included in this statistic, of course."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Tom."

Harry had such a *mouth.* Tom rather wanted to kiss it. He wanted to take all the oxygen out of Harry's lungs and leave him breathless, gasping. It would be an incredibly effective tactic to remedy the boy's insolence, and more importantly, it would quench the desire that thrummed through his veins at the sight of bright green eyes.

Momentarily, anyway - Tom was quite certain he could never have enough of Harry.

Regrettably, he could not act. Harry had said *stop,* and so stop he would. It pained him to do so, it *agonised* him that he could not feel Harry's delicious body heat again, that he could not taste sweetness upon his lips – but he would stop all the same. He would not betray the tentative trust he had just earned. He would not permanently turn away the boy whose dry wit and affection he found himself craving.

He would wait, instead. Harry was not uninterested, he was sure. He had returned a heated gaze when they had kissed – before Tom had fumbled.

It was inevitable that it happened again. Tom knew he was attractive, and had charmed many a person with his looks. He'd never *seduced* per se, but Harry had been gloriously responsive so far, so the task was far from impossible.

Tom was sure that once Harry trusted him *a little more,* Harry would be his. He would willingly indulge whatever assurance the boy required in order to get them there.

As if reading his thoughts, Harry prompted, "You said you had something to show me?"

Tom glanced to the scarf he'd returned to Harry, a frown on his face. The boy had hung it rather ineffectively around his neck. It wouldn't do, not for the cold outside weather.

"Allow me," Tom said, and without thinking about his actions whatsoever, he stepped forward and took the matter into his own hands.

He focused his attention to the ends of the red-and-gold wool, adjusting it until it was wrapped twice and Harry's neck and had been folded into a neat but fashionable twist. When he'd finished, he looked into Harry's eyes and his heart skipped a beat; they were even more remarkable up close. Flecks of gold and brown were visible within that brilliant green hue.

If only they were a little closer, close enough for their breaths to mix.

Tom exhaled and took a step backwards. He wondered if he was fooling himself. It seemed he was falling prey to Harry's charms, rather than the other way around.

“Much better,” he said, and he was unfortunately aware that his voice came out sounding strangled. Defensively, he added, “I’d say you look like a member of civilised society now, but no self-respecting person would wear their first initial.”

“I wear it to remind myself that my name’s Henry in this timeline, y’know.”

“Very funny.”

Harry grinned. "I'm positively hilarious," he said. "Really, though, it was a gift from my best friend’s mother. She gave me one every year…”

He trailed off, his voice holding an unmistakably wistful tone to it. Tom swallowed, unsure how to respond at all.

Harry had lived an *entire life* outside of everything he currently knew. There were eighteen years of experiences etched into Harry’s soul that had shaped him into the unendingly captivating man he was today, of which Tom knew very little of still.

Jealousy rose up within him at the thought. Jealousy over people that didn’t even exist yet – it was utterly ridiculous, but he could not help it.

How could he steal Harry’s heart when it was already taken by hundreds of people before him? How could he dare to capture Harry’s breath, when an older counterpart had sought to take it in a very different way?

“Let us walk,” he eventually decided upon responding, and gestured for Harry to join him by his side.

“We’re going into the Forbidden Forest?” Harry questioned five minutes later, surprise evident in his voice.

Tom hummed. He had heard the phrase ‘*actions spoke louder than words’* before*,* and he hoped it was true, because that idea was underpinning his current decisions.

“You do know,” Harry said, as they entered the thicket of the trees. Humour was so evident in his voice that Tom didn’t need to turn to know that he was smiling widely, as though he couldn’t help it. “It’s

called the *Forbidden* Forest for a reason."

"Don't tell me that's going to stop you," Tom parroted, and revelled in the responding laugh Harry elicited.

"We're not seeing thestrals this time, are we?" Harry asked.

"Not thestrals, no."

The thought had crossed his mind, but he didn't believe it would be an activity that would particularly convince Harry to trust him. The thestral herd hated him. If Harry's theory regarding their ability to sense acceptance of death was true, he doubted would ever change. He wasn't eager *for* it to change; Harry might convince him of many things, might convince him to *not continue* to create horcruxes, but he would never convince Tom to relinquish the immortality he already had.

Harry had never tried to, he noted. He wasn't sure what that meant. Had Harry simply not begun trying to convince him, did he quite rightfully believe it to be a lost cause, or did he not care that Tom was immortal, so long he did not abuse his power, his immortality even more than he already had – so long as he wasn't Lord Voldemort?

It was an interesting question, one he would quite like the answer to. However, it seemed an unwise topic to bring up, especially in the face of newly regained tentative trust, so Tom didn't.

They walked through the Forbidden Forest for several minutes until the weak winter sun streamed down at them, no longer mostly obscured by thick foliage. They'd arrived at a clearing Tom had visited in one upsetting fifth-year Care of Magical Creature class.

Beside him, Harry made a surprised noise. "Hippogriffs?"

Tom nodded in agreement, staring out at the clearing. There were only two of the creatures present, both with stormy grey coats. They were presumably mates; hippogriffs were notoriously territorial creatures.

The two hippogriffs seemed to be desperately basking in the sunlight and attempting to ignore the chilly wind as well the snow on the ground, which was still a couple of inches thick. As he watched, one of them opened their wings, as if to try and catch the sun's warmth on them better.

Tom cleared his throat. “I told you about the first time I encountered hippogriffs,” he said.

Harry nodded. “Vaguely. You said you got injured.”

“Swiped on the forearm by a talon, yes. I didn’t want to bow too deeply to it.”

To Tom’s surprise, Harry burst out laughing. “The parallels are funny for no good reason,” he explained. “The same thing happened to Draco – uh, Abraxas Malfoy’s grandson.”

Tom closed his eyes, tormented. *Parallels to Abraxas’s grandson.* Could there be any greater insult?

“We were schoolyard rivals – rather childish now that you think about it,” Harry elaborated. “Anyway, he saw me comfortable with Buckbeak and hopped on his high horse – or hippogriff, I suppose. He insulted Buckbeak, thinking nothing would come of it, and then was surprised when he got attacked. He was a spoiled brat back then. Incapable of accepting responsibility. He got his father involved, and things spiralled until the Ministry sent Macnair to execute Buckbeak. My friends and I rescued him, and my wrongly convicted godfather went on the run with him.”

Tom stared, feeling as though he’d had fifty pages worth of information condensed into a single paragraph and thrown at him. He grasped onto what little he understood.

“*Macnair?”*

”Walden Macnair,” Harry provided. “Probably the son of the Macnair in your year, I don’t know the family tree. But let me tell you, it was very cathartic to see Hagrid throw Macnair across the Great Hall in the Battle of Hogwarts. He had it a long time coming. He grabbed me by the throat once when we were fighting in the Department of Mysteries – then one of my friends shoved a wand in his eye, through the slit in the Death Eater mask.”

“What the fuck was your life,” Tom said, the expletive slipping out from the sheer, overwhelming feeling of being unable to comprehend any words that fell from Harry’s mouth. Then- “*Hagrid?”*

“Yes, Hagrid. Do you know, he was my first-ever friend? Gave me my first birthday cake, too. The icing was spelt wrong, of course.” Harry’s expression, which had been a light smile, suddenly turned as frosty as

the weather. “You framed him.”

“He had an *Acromantula* in the castle,” Tom bit back, instinctively on the defensive. “He was hardly innocent.”

“He was judged for the wrong crimes,” Harry returned. “You cut him off from a wand, from an education – perhaps even from the opportunity to mature. Why would he learn not to house dangerous beasts when he was punished for a situation that *wasn’t* his fault? The least you could do is apologise.”

“Apologise,” Tom repeated, scathingly. “Tell him I’m the Heir of Slytherin, why don’t we? *Sorry, I needed a scapegoat and you were easy, hope you understand.*”

“You *blamed him for a murder,”* Harry replied, angrily. “He did not deserve that. You should consider talking to Myrtle, too.”

Harry’s expression switched back into a smile, though it was a calculating one, the least sincere he had ever seen on the boy’s face. “You took me here, to hippogriffs, because you were going to bow to one. You want me to trust you, and you were going to show me that you *can* swallow your pride and unerring sense of superiority, that you *can* learn from your mistakes. Is that going to be a lie?”

Tom grimaced. While that was not the way he would've worded his motives, he couldn't deny that the truth still rang in Harry's words.

It was true that he had wanted Harry to figure out his intentions, but he had not considered that the boy would use them to his own advantage. Harry’s cunning would be a beautiful, tempting thing, if only it wasn’t used against him.

“You’re wasted in Gryffindor,” Tom said.

Harry raised his eyebrows to convey his disagreement. “What is it going to be, Tom?”

There wasn’t a question about it. He yearned for Harry's mind, body, soul - he desired the boy's trust in ways he'd previously thought unthinkable. He would do whatever it took to get the boy to trust him completely, to kiss him again, to indulge his fantasies. He would even enter a half-breed's dilapidated hut and relinquish his dignity by uttering the clumsiest sentences of half-assurances of his life. Not that Hagrid would notice his strained conversation, thick oaf that he was.

Tom stepped forward rather tentatively.

Snow crunched under his feet, and alerting the two hippogriffs to his presence. They turned, and then the larger of the two moved in front of the other, protectively.

The hippogriff looked one second away from assessing him as a threat and attacking, so Tom looked into orange eyes, swallowed, and did as he had been instructed to the previous year; he sunk into a deep bow.

He hated every second of it, even though his eyes remained on the hippogriff the entire time. He feared exposing his back to a creature with claws that could destroy his back in one fell swoop. He hated *bowing as if he were inferior, as though he were not in control.*

Several seconds passed that felt like an eternity. The hippogriff tilted its head at him, inspecting him with those uncanny eyes, but eventually, it bowed in response. Tom sighed with relief as he slowly and carefully straightened his back.

Footsteps crunched the snow behind him, and then Harry was by his side, copying his bow without hesitation.

The hippogriff took a liking to Harry, it seemed, because the action was almost immediately reciprocated. The smaller hippogriff trod out from behind, and after a second, the exchange was repeated.

Harry smiled, and then to Tom's stunned disbelief, he stepped slowly but deliberately forwards until his hand met the stormy-grey coat. Tom had an image of his forearm being slashed in his mind and had an urge to yell at Harry to retreat, but the hippogriff didn't posture itself offensively. It merely locked its gazes with Harry and tilted its head.

"You're good with creatures," Tom commented rather weakly.

"I respect them. I think you'll find that it goes a long way."

"I think our definitions of respect are quite different."

"Perhaps," Harry replied, and did not elaborate further. After some time had passed, in which Tom merely watched Harry pet and speak to the two creatures, the boy added, "We'd better get back."

It was only mid-afternoon, but that was probably wise. Scottish winters had depressingly short days.

“Alright,” Tom agreed. Harry spun back around and trudged a few dozen paces to reach him again, and Tom found his voice caught in his throat. Harry was more radiant than the weak winter’s sun, and his hair was more windswept than normal. He was a shining emerald gem amongst the snow, and Tom wanted to covet him. “Let’s do this again, Harry.”

“So keen to bow again?”

Tom scowled. “Not the hippogriffs. This was a one-time display, I hope you feel special.”

“Sure, Tom,” Harry replied. Even in the dim lighting of the Forest, Tom could see a glimmer in amusement in his bright, vivid eyes.

They walked through the thicket of trees in the Forbidden Forest in companionable silence. If Tom found himself wishing to slip his hand into Harry’s undoubtedly warm one halfway through the journey, that was nobody’s business but his own.

“Viridian Nott,” Tom requested upon entry to the Slytherin Common Room. “I need to speak with you.”

Aspire to become a Dark Lord by the name Voldemort he may no longer, but it was still incredibly gratifying that the weedy boy stood up immediately, abandoning the Wizard’s chess game he’d been playing with Randolph. It was equally gratifying that Randolph did not dare to complain.

From being belittled to being answerable to; *how the tables have turned,* Tom thought, amused.

“Is there something wrong, my Lord?” Viridian asked once they were in the sanctity of privacy wards and an unused classroom. He sounded timid, more so than usual.

“Quite the opposite,” Tom said. “I was merely concerned about your relationship with Miss Parkinson.”

“Ah,” Viridian replied, and averted his gaze. “I have not informed Cilla of the Knights of Walpurgis, I would not betray our secrets-”

“That is reassuring, Viridian,” Tom said softly, offering a smile that likely went unnoticed. His efforts truly went to waste on cowards that

did not even have the courage to look at him. “Not what I was referring to, however. You have no particular talents, you are not particularly pleasing to the eye. The only thing you have going for you is your surname, but you are hardly the only one with a respectable family amongst the hands Miss Parkinson could’ve held.”

“My Lord…?” Viridian asked, eyes still glued to the floor. There was a quiver in his voice now. “You… are you interested… you’re…”

Tom stared, perplexed, before barking out laughter. Viridian flinched, but Tom ignored it.

“I have no indecent interest in your girlfriend.”

“Of course not… I apologise…”

“You are remarkably average,” Tom continued. “Yet, it would appear that you have managed to capture the attention of whom you desire regardless. I am all ears.”

Viridian looked up, surprise evident on his features. “My Lord…?”

Tom resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. “You are *average,* not *thick*; you know very well what I want.”

“My apologies,” Viridian mumbled again. “Somewhere quiet, probably somewhere that has some sort of meaning to you and- uh, well. Somewhere meaningful, I mean to say, would be the best place to ask her out. It shows you’ve put thought in, that you respect her, that you respect the notion of putting effort into a relationship.”

Tom grimaced at the pronoun but said nothing of it. “I pointedly remember that you asked Miss Parkinson out in the middle of the Great Hall.”

“Well, the teacup – and you were the one to suggest it. Not that it wasn’t effective, of course, my Lord,” Viridian added hurriedly.

Great, just great. Having his own thoughtless advice reported back to him, that wasn’t helpful in the slightest.

“By your logic, she should’ve said no. Tell me why she didn’t.”

“We had a dance together at a Ministry gala in the summer just past,” Viridian answered. “I am quite a good partner. I had lessons in-”

“Any *other* reason?” Tom pressed, growing bored. He and his lack of

respectable surname did not get the opportunity for Ministry galas and dances. It had been a mistake to think that Viridian could be the *slightest* bit helpful; it was all-too-clear that he only had a girlfriend out of pure luck. Tom was handsome and charming and intelligent in the way the boy could only dream.

“I suppose,” Viridian replied, scrunching his nose up in thought. “I suppose I have always respected her, even when-”

Tom was quite sure, once again, that the sort of respect Viridian was referring to was quite unalike his own definition.

“-we were children and our parents used to organise play-dates. I remember telling her she was really smart when we had tutoring together once and she’d be top of the class in Hogwarts for sure.” Viridian swallowed and hurriedly tacked on, “Of course, I was wrong in that regards, but-”

“Thank you for your assistance,” Tom interrupted, lying. “You’re dismissed.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Viridian uttered. He hesitated exiting the classroom, however. “Does this mean… might I ask which… lucky girl you’ve set your sights on?”

Tom did not appreciate Viridian’s assumption that he was entitled to such information, but there was no point concealing something that would inevitably come out. Tom would not be hiding Harry when he succeeded; that was an indignity that Harry did not deserve.

“I suspect you’ll be meeting *him* very soon,” Tom replied, and took immense glee in the way that Viridian swallowed, eyes wide with fear as he realised his mistake.

“I didn’t mean to assume-”

“You didn’t,” Tom agreed. “Just ensure you show him respect.”

“I do not know who-”

Tom was rather looking forward to watching Harry at his party. Harry clearly knew pureblood etiquette, how to be subtle and cunning; he simply chose to be unabashedly brazen instead. It would be interesting to see if that changed in a setting in which he had less control over.

Either way, Harry was sure to stand out, be *remarkable,* mesmerising.

“You *will*,” Tom promised. “Now, I believe I dismissed you.”

*

Tom had found one of Harry’s flaws, and it was proving to be immensely fatal.

Harry was a *morning* person. It was admittedly not that early – half past seven – but it was *Scotland winter,* which meant the sun wouldn’t rise for another hour. Harry *woke up before the crack of dawn.*

“I think fighting Dark Lords has given you brain damage,” Tom announced as he sat opposite Harry, in lieu of a greeting. It was the second day in a row that he had deigned to wake up so they would share breakfast together, and it would be the last. Harry Potter was not worth the obnoxious time of morning.

Harry raised an amused eyebrow, looking over the top of his newspaper. “I thought it was the time-travel, but if you’re willing to take responsibility and compensate me, by all means, go ahead.”

Tom reevaluated. It was hard not to smile when Harry was undoubtedly *funny.* He had never bantered with someone before – the exchanges he had with Abraxas contained more idiocy than banter.

“Fat chance,” Tom replied. “Anything in the paper?”

“There was a magical fire in St. Ottery Catchpole and the Chudley Cannons has lost five of five games in the season so far.”

“The *what?”*

“The Chudley Cannons, of course.” Tom continued to stare at Harry blankly. “You really know nothing about Quidditch, don’t you?”

Tom wondered if he should reevaluate *again.* He busied himself by making a cup of coffee instead; he evidently needed caffeine for this conversation.

“I prefer not to associate myself with that barbaric game.”

Harry, apparently, did not care for his personal feelings on the matter. He continued to explain that the Chudley Cannons hadn’t won the League since 1892, finished on the bottom more often than not, and, “Their current motto is ‘*we shall conquer*’, but they must change it at

some point. In my time it's '*let's all just keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best*'."

Tom could not help but laugh despite himself. Harry always elicited such a complex, constantly contradictory array of emotions from him. He would have it no other way.

"You're more pleasant now that you have coffee in your system," Harry commented, watching him take a sip from a teacup.

Tom, of course, scowled in response.

"You are *obnoxious,*" he emphasized. "You wake up at a godforsaken time of morning, in the middle of winter when it's impossibly cold no less, for no reason other than to read the Quidditch news before everyone else."

"You really are a snake," Harry replied, snickering as he spread jam on a second slice of toast. "You sound like you want to go into hibernation."

"Brumation," Tom corrected instinctively. When Harry looked at him blankly, he continued, "It's a state of lethargy commonplace in cold-blooded animals. Mammals hibernate."

"Same difference," Harry muttered. "Gods, you're a nerd."

"You're the one who was complaining about the education system, and now you mock me for being educated. Do make up your mind, Harry."

"Whatever," Harry had the audacity to reply, and Tom's vague resemblance to irritation was quickly lost as he became distracted by a spot of jam in the corner of Gryffindor's mouth. He rather wanted to a finger to wipe it off, or perhaps he'd even utilise his tongue – it was really quite unfair, he thought, that Harry was so tantalising.

Harry then licked his lips and Tom wondered if he was about to lose his mind.

"Viridian Nott asked Priscilla Parkinson out in the middle of the Great Hall, say, two weeks ago," he blurted out.

"Um," Harry replied. "Okay? I do think I remember hearing a squeal. There was both a Nott and a Parkinson in my year, but I don't know anything of either of those family trees, if that's what you're asking."

That hadn't been what he was asking, though he honestly hadn't been sure what he *had.* Tom frowned at himself, and his frown deepened when an unexpected voice broke through his thoughts.

"Henry! You woke me up when you left the dorm this morning, you complete asshole. It's not even *dawn.*"

Seventh-year Gryffindor Prefect Prewett flopped down on the chair beside Harry and piled up an assortment of breakfast foods onto his plate. He was still clad in his pyjamas. It all made for an incredibly unbecoming sight.

"You had your trunk lying in the middle of the room! How was I supposed to *not* trip over it, in the darkness?"

"Are you alright, Harry?" Tom asked softly, feeling distinctly left-out of the conversation already. He rather wanted to curse Prewett for daring to interrupt them, even though he'd technically interrupted nothing because Tom had blanked.

"I'm fine, don't worry."

Prewett glanced over at him and blinked, as if only just noticing him. It was quite a blow; his aura of confidence and power typically meant all eyes in every room naturally gravitated towards him. It was quite disappointing to find out that he had little effect on thick Gryffindors.

"Oh. Am I interrupting something?" Prewett asked, and nudged Harry's shoulder as he took a bite of his sausage. A splotch of pink appeared on Harry's cheeks.

"Nothing along those lines, Nate," he muttered.

"These awful hours of yours are beginning to make more sense," Prewett continued.

"Bugger off, Tom has nothing to do with this. You know I always wake up early."

"I'm most opposed to this hour, in fact," Tom agreed, bemused by the conversation.

The Gryffindors had some kind of silent exchange, in which eyebrows were raised and Harry flushed deeper shades of delectable red. It ended when Prewett turned to Tom, winked, and said, "I'll see if my own partner is awake and wants her worst habits indulged," and then

proceeded to leave the Great Hall, his plate two-thirds uneaten. Tom wondered if he'd forgotten that he was still wearing his pyjamas.

Harry slid down his chair slightly, looking mollified. "Ignore Nate, please," he muttered. "I love him, but he's an idiot."

That, he could whole-heartedly agree with. Prewett did have one unexpected redeeming quality, however; *not* getting in the way of his goal.

Tom smiled. "I will admit, he has a point. What other terrible habits of yours shall I begrudgingly indulge, besides from the atrocious time of morning?"

Harry's eyes widened in surprise for a second, but then it was quickly replaced by a mischievous grin. Tom wondered, as he was dragged out of the Great Hall, whether he had just made a terrible mistake.

*

Harry wasn't entirely sure how it happened. It seemed that one minute, he had spent a rather significant percentage of his time attempting to figure out which step forward wouldn't bring about Voldemort and get himself killed, and the next minute, he was dragging Tom Riddle to a broom shed, most of his previous concerns at the back of his mind.

He had a theory. Voldemort had invented *unsupported flight* in order to avoid broomsticks – Harry would bet all the Galleons he'd brought with him to the past that the man was utterly rubbish at controlling a broom.

Tom always looked so put-together with his appearance, his movements were always fluid and graceful, and his speech was usually eloquent. To think of him fumbling on a broom and proving that he wasn't the best at *everything* – well, Harry wasn't quite sure why the idea was appealing. It had nothing to do with feeding his ego; it was more closely related to the occasional urge he had to utterly destroy the perfect wave in Tom's coiffed hair.

Alas, it seemed he would never have the opportunity to watch Tom fumble. The second the boy realised where they were heading, he stopped walking and hissed, "*Absolutely not.*"

“It’ll be fun,” Harry tried. “You can even use my broom. I’ve fiddled with it as best as I could, it’s much faster than its model is supposed to be. Insider’s knowledge from the future, you know.”

He didn’t add that the steering was still a bit off. He didn’t think that would be particularly convincing.

“Not that I don’t have faith in your charm work, but absolutely not,” Tom repeated.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared,” Harry replied. He attempted to open the door to the broom shed, but a strong Stinging Hex was fired at his hand. “Hey, that hurt.”

“We are not *flying on broomsticks.*”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You said you’d indulge my worst habits. I’m pretty sure you consider Quidditch to be near the bottom, probably just above defeating Lord Voldemort.”

“Quidditch is definitely at the bottom.”

“Wonderful,” Harry replied, hiding his surprise by reaching for the doorknob once again.

He was stopped by an overpowered Tickling Charm that caused him to bark out laughter almost painfully, followed by a Jelly-Legs Jinx. Not to be defeated by first-year spells, Harry reached out as he fell, pulling Tom by the arm to the ground.

In theory, it had been a foolproof idea. In practice, it meant that he landed on his back, sprawled on the grass all ungainly, had the breath knocked out of him, and Tom fell right on top of him.

That would’ve been perfectly fine. He could’ve recovered from the indignity of the position quite easily. He *could’ve,* except glee dripped from every fibre of Tom’s body and he looked entirely unrepentant about it.

“You are *divine*,” Tom uttered. Harry would’ve shoved him away, scoffed something about it being entirely expected that he enjoyed having his archnemesis below him, in an assumed position of submission, had it not been for the tone of his voice. It was almost *reverential.*

Harry found his throat closing up instead. Something this intense was

a little beyond his capabilities to handle. He found he couldn't think of anything at all except that Tom's eyes had flickered from warm brown to a red burgundy again.

He didn't entirely hate it.

It wasn't rage in Tom's eyes, nor did it imply anything particularly sinister. It was *lust,* or desire, or something base akin to it. It was strangely flattering.

"A devout man would pray to you, Harry," Tom continued, his voice barely above a whisper. Harry attempted to swallow but found a lump in his throat instead, and a blush painting his cheeks.

"Something tells me you're no man of the Church," he replied, almost choking out his words.

"I am not," Tom confirmed lewdly, his eyes still aflame. Harry was not sure when he had gotten so close that they were practically inhaling the same air. "I have been called the devil incarnate, and maybe it's even true. I would corrupt you with my sins and you would thank me for it."

"Fuck," Harry responded, shuddering at an erotic image his mind conjured, hopeless as it was currently. "That sounds like some religious trauma you've got there."

Tom abruptly pulled away, the tense moment replaced by another of a very different kind. Harry felt immediately regretted speaking upon impulse, but could find no words to assuage the situation.

"Perhaps," Tom replied, and then he rolled over onto the grass so that they were lying side-by-side on their backs. He somehow manage to make the movement appear entirely graceful. "My upbringing was not so good."

"Nor mine," Harry replied, swallowing the lump in his throat. "They phased out orphanages, but I know my aunt and uncle would've dumped me in one in a blink of an eye if they'd still existed."

"You did imply you were brought up by Muggles. I didn't realise they were your relatives. They didn't treat you well?"

Harry bit his lip, contemplating how much to divulge. Tom had briefly mentioned Wool's orphanage before, and it only felt fair that he shared something of similar lieu.

"No," he said. "They had a son of their own and they made it very apparent that their home was only supposed to house three, not four."

Harry was not quite sure what to make of the expression on Tom's face.

“Blood isn’t necessarily thicker than water,” the Slytherin mused.

“You would say that, it’s not like *you* were the one to kill three of your blood relatives.”

Tom turned his head so fast in the grass that Harry’s neck hurt thinking about it. “How do you know of this?"

Harry swallowed. There were several important things he was keeping from Tom Riddle – the prophecy, his previous status as a horcrux, his status as Master of Death – but he believed Tom had no right to know about them.

The knowledge he’d garnered from Dumbledore’s collection of memories did not fall into that category, however.

Swallowing, Harry began to explain he private 'lessons' he'd had with Dumbledore in his sixth-year. Tom remained blank-faced throughout it all. Not a single trace of emotion could be found on his flawless features, although Harry searched for it - desperately. It was only now, when he saw the mask in full full-force again, that he realised that he hadn't been subjected to any of Tom's less-than-authentic expressions in ages.

“I’m not sorry that I garnered information pertaining to horcruxes and their related murders," Harry finished, somewhat anxiously. "I believe that was essential for defeating Voldemort, and I will never express regret over that. For the rest, though... I invaded your privacy. I apologise."

There was a long pause, which was eventually broken by, “I suppose I’m glad I don’t have to figure out how to tell you some things, one day.”

Harry stared. The response he'd been expecting - anger, violence in either a verbal or physical form - was so incredibly far removed from calm, contemplative one he had received.

“I am still upset with you," Tom continued. "Don’t get me wrong, I couldn’t care less about my parents – but that isn’t something anyone’s

entitled to see or know or stick their fingers into.“

“I know,” Harry replied, still stunned by the maturity of the response. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m more upset at Dumbledore, of course. He apparently went out of his way to invade my privacy *and* show all the ugly history around. I’m not upset with you for viewing what he told you to view – I’m upset you didn’t tell me earlier. I want to trust you, but how can I, if there are things like this that smell of lies and omissions between us?”

Harry swallowed. *Oh*, he thought.

The sentence sounded manipulative but the ask was quite reasonable, so he did not think it had been intended as such. Rather, he thought that Tom had spoken truthfully.

Tom wanted to *trust* him. For someone that could potentially live seventy-one years without ever trusting, that was quite a statement. He would do well not to dismiss that, although he remained staunch in his belief that Tom had no right to know about prophecies and human horcruxes and Masters of Death.

“There are two more interrelated things I haven’t said regarding Voldemort and I,” Harry replied. “They don’t mean anything between you and I, however, and I don’t want them to become such. That chapter of my life is over, and blessedly so.”

Tom stared him for a second, some of the emptiness of his expression leaving. If he were to squint, Harry might dare declare that there was a slight crinkle around the other boy’s eyes.

“Okay, I believe you,” Tom replied, surprisingly Harry despite his observations. He was rarely so agreeable. “I hope you’ll tell me eventually, though – I do enjoy hearing your stories.”

There was something about the way that he said *eventually* that sounded like a promise, and Harry's heart beat a little faster.

Tom Riddle had quickly become something he did not anticipate – someone who highly enjoyable to be around. Someone, who, in time, he could see himself trusting completely. He did things he didn’t want to, such as bow to hippogriffs, in the hope that Harry would trust him. He’d woken up two days in a row at a time he hated just because Harry had said off-handedly that *he* woke up early. He lay on his back in the grass and talked – something Harry would never have imagined

him doing, with his tendency to speak and act pretentiously. He talked through his upset rather than acted upon on it.

The bar was admittedly rather low.

Following a sudden, overpowering impulse, Harry asked, "Would you like to go to Diagon Alley on your birthday? I can Apparate us there. You can do your own thing if you want, because I admit I need to buy some robes for your party."

He also needed to buy a *gift,* which was a terrifying prospect, and not just because he was shopping so last minute. Tom Riddle was not a cheap person. There would certainly be some extravagant things presented to him, in hopes of currying favour. Harry, on the other hand, only had a limited amount of Galleons that he'd taken into the past.

Swallowing, Harry continued, "We can meet up later for lunch? I can pay, of course-"

"Harry," Tom interrupted his rambling. "I'm flattered that you would even offer. I'd love to come." He added something under his breath that sounded suspiciously akin to, '*and watch you get fitted'*.

Harry he exhaled heavily as even as he smiled, pondering the promise that had been spoken in '*eventually'* once again.

His unformed half-questions were given an answer later that evening, by no less than two members of Tom's schoolyard gang.

Truthfully, he had been wondering when any sycophants would notice how much time their Lord was spending with an unnameable and unremarkable Gryffindor. It therefore didn't come as a total surprise when he found himself ambushed in a first-floor corridor that didn't contain spying portraits, by two recognisable faces.

The first was Randolph Lestrange, who he had met earlier, and looked so disturbingly alike his two deranged sons that it was hard not to blanch at the sight of him. The other was Viridian Nott, who Tom had mentioned earlier and also looked very alike the relative Harry knew from his own era.

"Well, what do we have here?" Lestrange asked, snickering at the sight of him. "A Gryffindor who's bitten off more than he can chew?"

Both Lestrange and Nott had their wands pointed at him, yet Harry's first thought in response was regret. He regretted that he'd stopped obsessively pouring over the Marauder's Map the minute he'd been certain Tom wasn't going to kill him. Rookie mistakes, it seemed.

His second thought was that they weren't particularly intimidating. Both of their hands quivered ever-so-slightly. What was more, they were simply schoolyard bullies. They weren't murderers – not yet, and hopefully not ever. While they'd almost certainly dipped their toes, feet, ankles and knees in the Dark Arts, they weren't completely entrenched in it. They were certainly not the hardened criminals that Harry had seen in their descendants - the descendants Harry had fought and survived against.

Still, two was not a number he could underestimate. He knew he could not pull his wand without having curses fired at him, and he wasn't so confident in his ability to dodge two spell-casters. His wandless magic would also be entirely insufficient against an armed duellist, let alone two of them.

"I'm afraid you'll have to elaborate," Harry replied, attempting to buy time so that his whirring mind could find a solution. "I have no idea what could possibly warrant a confrontation such as this."

"*No idea?"* Lestrange repeated. "You know exactly what you've done. I saw you this morning with him!"

Internally, Harry groaned. As he had presumed, it seemed this was about Tom. He rather hoped Lestrange hadn't spied on their skirmish in the grass. Given the timing of this confrontation, however, Harry could guess that Lestrange probably *had.*

"Admitting to being a voyeur, Lestrange? That's very brave of you."

Lestrange's face turned an ugly shade of purple that distinctly reminded him of Uncle Vernon. An unfortunate comparison, though Harry would bet his life they could be equally as ruthless.

"So, you admit it, then?" Nott asked, somewhat less viciously than his friend. "There *is* something going on between you two?"

"I really doubt that's any of your business," Harry responded, rather abrasively. Truthfully, he didn't even know the answer to that question. There was no definition to his relationship with Tom - there never had been, in this timeline. They both guessed at each other's intentions, which in hindsight, was probably not the best way to go

about things.

“We don’t have time for this,” Lestrange muttered to his accomplice. “No portraits; no witnesses. Did you or did you not dose Tom Riddle with Amortentia? Answer truthfully. *Imperio!*”

Harry didn’t bother to step out of range of the Unforgiveable, too floored by the mad theory he’d been presented with. The spell hit him in the chest, and the unfortunately familiar feeling of bliss encompassed him.

Answer truthfully…

Unfortunately for Lestrange, he did not have the strength of will that Voldemort had; and even Voldemort could not succeed in controlling him.

“See, Lestrange, the funny thing is that I actually have *morals,*” Harry snapped.

Lestrange evidently did not expect him to break free of his Imperius at all, let alone within the span of two seconds. Harry found himself taking vicious pleasure in the paper-white colour he turned.

“I also find it deeply saddening that you don’t see the complete hypocrisy here,” Harry continued. “You’re terribly against one form of mind control, Amortentia – as you should be – but the Imperius is perfectly fine?”

Nott whispered something to his partner-in-crime, who shook his head. He then tightened his grip on his wand, which had begun to become looser as Harry had spoken.

Harry internally sighed. Of *course* Lestrange had to be the leader. He was apparently the least reasonable of the two.

“You’d be convincing in your righteous act if it weren’t for the fact that you *must* be lying,” Lestrange replied. “We’ve spent *six years* with Tom – do you really think we can’t tell when something’s blaringly wrong? He’s never shown any interest in a relationship, has politely declined at least two dozen Valentine’s day hopefuls over the years and proceeded to scorn several of them later in privacy – why in Salazar’s name would he suddenly be interested *now*, let alone with *you*? He spends every day with you, doesn’t seem to care about anything *important* anymore, and what’s more – I saw him exited that half-breed hut yesterday, and when I asked, he said it was your idea.

Tom would *never* obey someone. He finds a way to mention you directly or indirectly at least once per day, and it's always something along the lines of *respect him* or *he's twice the man you are,* and for him, that's practically a declaration of everlasting love. If there's anything *I* know, it's that Tom doesn't do that. You've clearly dosed him with Amortentia – anything weaker he would surely be able to overpower."

That was an overload of information, Harry thought.

It was gratifying to know that Tom *had* followed his advice as spoken to Hagrid. He hadn't mentioned it, which made Harry wonder whether Tom had actually found himself not totally despising Hagrid and had felt too embarrassed or guilty to admit it.

"You seem to have observed rather a lot about Tom's apparent lack of interest," Harry commented.

"Of course I have, I'm his closest confident."

Lestrange spluttered slightly with his words, and Harry immediately registered them as a cover-up. He grimaced as several things fell into place at once.

He suddenly knew why Rodolphus Lestrange had not minded that his wife was completely obsessed with Voldemort. *He was the same.* Both Rodolphus and Rabastan had been brainwashed by their father and his obsession until they shared it.

Indoctrination was not an uncommon phenomena, amongst Death Eater families. However, the explicit nature of this particular obsession, accompanied by the familial relationships, made it one of the more disturbing things Harry had heard. That was saying quite a bit.

"I'll tell you one thing," Harry responded, swallowing the sickening feeling that threatened to dredge up the contents of his stomach. "I have seen someone under the effects of Amortentia. It is so strong that they cannot think or speak of anyone *but* whoever dosed them. That contradicts what you said, if he merely mentions me once or twice a day."

"And he starts off the essay with a confession!" Lestrange exclaimed, in the tone of voice of a Quidditch commentator. He turned to Nott, as if expecting laughter. He didn't receive it; Nott was staring at Harry with an unplaceable expression. Realising he wasn't about to receive a laugh, Lestrange turned back to Harry and added, "You're an idiot, I

knew it – just with a lucky resistance to the Imperius."

Then, he cast a second curse. Not an Unforgiveable, but a particularly nasty Dark curse designed to turn every organ including the skin inside-out.

Harry side-stepped, and the Elder Wand practically jumped into his hand from his pocket. He wasn't ungrateful, though he was mildly annoyed by the fact that it hadn't chosen to do it *earlier,* when he was weighing up his options. *Temperamental thing, much like its Creator.*

Lestrange smiled. "Finally given up spinning lies? You're going to duel me like a man?"

"I've no interest in humiliating you, truly."

Lestrange growled. Harry wasn't quite sure how Lestrange's face didn't turn bright-red; in his opinion, the sound was as embarrassing as this entire baseless ordeal.

"You should know that I'm the second-best duellist in this school, *Evans*. I'm *irreplaceable* – meanwhile you're just a bastard with no name who's made the worst mistake of his life."

With his words, Lestrange threw a bone-shattering curse. Harry neatly side-stepped it again, casting a glance to Nott as he did so. The weedy boy didn't seem inclined to join in, which was a relief.

"Don't presume to know me, Lestrange."

"*Fight me!"* Lestrange ordered. It was a far less intimidating impression of command than even an eleven-year-old Tom Riddle had been capable of. In that moment, he sounded exactly like his two sons who had suffered Azkaban for fifteen years; out of control.

"As you wish," Harry replied, and responded with his signature *Expelliarmus.* Revenge – for what Lestrange's in-laws and sons had done in Harry's original timeline – would be sweet, but Harry also had no desire to get blood on his hands. Those days of bloody battles were *over.*

"*The Disarming Charm*," Lestrange cackled, cruelly. "Tom said you'd duelled him – I'm sure he utterly *humiliated* you. Is this why you dosed him? Not because he didn't reciprocate your itty-bitty Gryffindorish feelings, as I originally thought, but revenge?"

Harry laughed, even as he was forced to raise a shield charm because curses were flung at him in increasingly unavoidable intervals. “Tom didn’t tell you the results of our duel, did he? It was a *draw*, Lestrange.”

It didn’t matter whether Lestrange actually believed him, because for a split-second, he paled and hesitated.

Harry used it to his fullest advantage, and cast two successive, over-powered spells. The first, another *Expelliarmus,* shattered Lestrange’s shield. The boy was forced to evade the second, a Confundus Charm. In his momentary distraction, Lestrange didn’t notice that Harry had also cast a non-verbal Tripping Jinx. He fell into it, and Harry proceeded to Stun him.

Overconfidence truly was unbecoming. Harry had ended very few duels as quick as that one.

He turned to Nott. The boy was an utterly useless bystander, but Harry did understand how Slytherin power dynamics worked, and he supposed he was grateful that it hadn’t been a two-on-one.

“When you revive Lestrange, be sure to tell him that the school has a Pensieve,” he said. “I won’t hesitate to bring this to attention if I hear that illegal Dark curses have been cast again, whether that be on me or anyone else.”

Finding nothing else to say, Harry walked away. He felt Nott’s eyes on his back until he turned around a corner in the corridor.

It took five minutes for Harry to reach his Gryffindor seventh-year dormitory and pull the Marauder's Map out of his bedside table. Due to the size of the Hogwarts grounds, it took another five minutes to locate Lucretia Black and Ignatius Prewett's names on it. Another five minutes later, Harry found himself in the library, hoping to all Gods that they were actually *studying,* and not snogging each other.

"Guys? Make yourselves decent," he all but begged, not daring to turn the aisle.

"We wouldn't be indecent in *such a public space,*" came Lucy's reply, about ten seconds suspiciously late.

Harry waited another ten seconds before daring step out. Thankfully, neither of them seemed to have a single hair disheveled on their heads, but that could also be due to some very quick, non-verbal

charm work. Either way, he didn't want to know - as long as it wasn't in front of his poor eyes.

"Is there something wrong?" Nate asked, noting the reckless abandon with which Harry flopped onto the chair beside him.

"Everything is wrong," Harry replied, melodramatically.

Nate squinted at him. "Weren't you with Riddle, just now? I thought everything was going well on that front. Weren't you all cozy with him, this morning?"

Harry resisted the urge to groan. "*That* - Tom only wakes up early so he can complain about it. It's his favourite hobby, and frankly his least disturbing one - to complain."

"You're on first-name basis, now?" Lucy commented, sounding far too gleeful than strictly necessary.

"I hate happy couples," Harry retorted. "You're always so optimistic."

"Smells like jealousy."

Harry sighed heavily. If he were honest, he did not need Lestrange's unreliable, roundabout words to put the pieces together. He had simply not *wanted* to, for fear of what it could mean for the *friendship* he thought they were building.

It was blatantly obvious that Tom was attracted to him. The boy had initiated a kiss, and there were several occasions separate from that wherein he'd thought Tom was two seconds away from utterly devouring him. His expression was unmistakably lustful during those times, and the colour his eyes flickered was, contrary to Harry's initial assumption, only further proof of his attraction.

Harry should, by all rights, be disgusted. He knew exactly how depraved Tom Riddle's true character could be. He knew exactly how many innocents could suffer at his hands.

Yet, Tom had also denounced Voldemort. He had gone onto show proof that he was someone very separate from that monster; he demonstrated that he could admit wrongdoings, that he could reflect, and had even shown an inclination towards friendship. Harry wouldn't be disgusted if Tom officially extended his hand in friendship, so it wouldn't make much sense for him to be disgusted by the proposition of another kind of relationship, particularly considering that heat

coiled within him at the sight of Tom's burning gaze.

He had first thought it at twelve, and he'd thought it again at sixteen; Tom Riddle was *handsome*. At eighteen, he realised that transparent murder-happy horcruxes and pensieve memories did not do him justice in the slightest. In real life, Tom Riddle was so much more striking; his air of confidence, his eloquence and grace was beyond remarkable. Harry had been in close proximity to him multiple times, and each time, he had only been able to think that Tom was *arresting* in his natural beauty, that he must've been sculpted by a higher being.

Harry couldn't deny that he was physically attracted, but he wasn't one to engage in purely physical relationships. He'd had enough of feeling used in his life; he didn't want to become a tool for pleasure, too. He wanted a meaningful, long-lasting relationship wherein he would never doubt that he was loved.

If Harry thought about it, however, there were hints that Tom was not solely sexually interested. He listened, he made compromises, he complimented, he smiled, he laughed, he said *I want to trust you,* and tellingly, he did not push the matter when Harry told him to stop.

If it was solely physical, Harry did not think Tom would heed those words whatsoever. He was the sort of awful person to take what he wanted because he had full confidence that his silver tongue would keep him from consequences. Tom *had* heeded his words, though. That implied that Tom wanted to be *trusted.*

Furthermore, he was willing to wake up at times he called '*godforsaken*' - the only time Harry had ever heard him slip up with his tendency to avoid solely Muggle expletives. Tom was self-obsessed; if the small act of waking up early wasn't indicative of respect, of his desire for something *meaningful,* Harry didn't know what was.

"I care too much - I don't want to be making a mistake," Harry found himself saying.

Against all odds, he had enjoyed every moment he had spent with Tom recently. He liked the boy's cynical sense of humour. He liked that they could banter, and he even liked that they could argue - so long as it did not result in an invasion of his mind. Although the reasoning for their similar circumstances was an oppressive fact hanging over his head, Harry did like that they could relate to each other. And, of course, he liked that Tom *did* listen to him, that Tom

smiled at him and even occasionally laughed, without the sound ringing with falsity.

He did not want to realise belatedly that he had been played *again*. He did not want those moments between them to be sullied.

"Sometimes, you need to take a leap of faith," Nate replied. "We laugh about it now, but I was so afraid of asking Lucy out."

"He panicked so much, but all I could think was that he was adorable," Lucy supplied, looking at her boyfriend with unmistakable fondness in her eyes. "He bought me flowers. *Everlasting* flowers."

"Right." Harry ignored the comment about flowers - it was the last thing he could imagine Tom Riddle appreciating. The advice about taking a leap of faith, however, was not so useless. He had taken several leaps of faith already, and while some of them *perhaps* had been betrayed, he did not think that no ground had been made. Quite the opposite, in fact.

He rubbed his forehead. He worried over the possibility that he had the worst idea in the world, to the point where he had not considered the possibility that it could be one of the *better* ones. He had not considered the possibility that he might be pleasantly surprised, that he might be *happy*.

He had always been attracted to danger, after all.

Tom Riddle was the definition of danger.

What was one more leap of faith?

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for taking a month to get this update out. I got caught up with uni 3

50% of this chapter is Tom finding a way to complain about anything - Scotland, the weather, the time of day, Quidditch - and the other 50% is him being an complete goner.
Harry is not much better. The first thing he wants to do with his Apparition license is break the school rules and take Tom out for lunch in Diagon Alley ;) it's not a date. but.

Also RIP Randolph Lestrange. First he gets blackmailed, then crucio'd and now he gets humiliated. He is not having a good time in this fic LMFAO. At least this time his suffering was deserved and not excessively cruel…?

Thanks for reading! Comments and kudos appreciated as always <3

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Theoretically, the date should've left happiness or excitement racing through his veins, but it was with shaky hands that Tom pulled himself out of bed. *Cramped Tube stations and crumbling walls and sirens wailing through the night, dead little boys with verdant green eyes;* like sand falling through spread fingers, the full dream escaped him upon waking, leaving behind only haunting images and a heart that beat wildly against the tendrils of fear wrapped around it.

Such dreams were a weekly, biweekly occurrence even, but for all his expensive mind, he could not work out how to become accustomed to it. Even Occlumentic techniques had scarcely helped him escape the grip of terror that the Muggle war held over him.

The thought led him to contemplate Voldemort.

Above anything else, the fashioned name had represented an opportunity to reinvent himself. It was an escape from the chains of a Muggle surname and infuriating bland given name. It was *Vol-de-mort,* flight from Death, a symbol of what he had *conquered,* what weaknesses he had shed.

It seemed impossible to him, as he sat in his bed with the Slytherin-green covers pooled around his waist and with a tremor in his hand, but he *knew* that Lord Voldemort – from Harry's timeline – had not dreamed of the Muggle War any longer. Lord Voldemort had been raging his own war – it was a demonstration that screamed '*Look at how much lesser you are, succumbing to the fears I am now the bringer of.'*

Whilst Tom's goals were now vastly different to Lord Voldemort's, he could not find *everything* about Lord Voldemort undesirable. His fear of war dictated his life: his nightmares, his waking moments, his oh-so-trembling hands in the dreadful mornings. He wanted nothing more than to shed his fear of war, and the only way to overcome it seemed to be somewhere in the path to becoming Lord Voldemort.

It was… interesting, to contemplate that. It was a thought that had the potential to inspire a lot of hatred. Although obstacles would undoubtedly present themselves in the hypothetical rise of Lord

Voldemort, there was only one person who truly stood in the way.

When Tom thought of Harry Potter, however, it was not hatred that was summoned. There was mild irritation, but that was negligible compared to the fondness that surged through him. It was fondness over the stupidest things, too; the frown that would form on Harry's face when he read over a presumably difficult passage, the wild gestures he would make when he was explaining something, the way he would swallow hastily so he could respond faster, the incoherent construction of his sentences when he was excited or passionate.

Tom was also unbearably fond of the crinkle at the edge of Harry's eyes that greeted him in unimportant corridor, twenty minutes later.

(It registered to him, very faintly, that he still did not know how Harry kept doing that – finding him with utmost ease. It was a peculiar knack to have.)

"Happy seventeenth," Harry said, and then frowned. Tom silently bemoaned the loss of the eye-crinkle. "Are you alright?"

Tom thought he'd managed to successfully dispel the tension coiled within his body over the time that it had taken him to get ready, but apparently not. He uttered the only reply anyone wanted to hear; "I'm quite fine."

In that hypothetical exchange, engaged in only out of social obligation, the other conversant would be glad for the obvious lie, and then push the conversation in the direction they wanted. The pattern never faltered; Tom had observed the very thing occur again and again hundreds of times. At Wool's, between children, between children and matrons, between pastors and children. At Hogwarts, between fellow Slytherins, between students and staff, between staff.

However, Harry did not conform to his observations. He did not push the conversation in a different direction, all-too-glad for his social obligation to be over. Instead, a look of concern crossed his face.

Tom found himself swallowing thickly. Harry was an obstacle in Voldemort's way – but he was not one in Tom's way. He was someone who genuinely *cared*. He'd shown or even explicitly stated it so often that Tom could not doubt it.

He corrected his response after another moment's hesitation, unable to help the tumbling way that the words came out of his mouth.

“You said the Muggle war ends in ’45. But knowing that doesn’t change anything. Doesn’t help anything. You’ve all but told me I live through it, but the images are seared into my mind – into my subconscious. I close my *eyes* – and when I *sleep* – the war ends in ’45, but when does *that* end?”

The *understanding* in Harry’s eyes was startling. Tom looked at him – *really* looked at him, properly, for what felt like the first time.

He still found it true that Harry’s eyes were bright, vibrant, his hair still an artful mess, his skin still a glorious sun-kissed shade. What Tom had missed, all the times he’d gazed upon the boy, was what he tried to ignore in the mirror every day. The shadow that lingered here and there, irremovable, an eternal reminder of the *too much* he had seen, the *too great* of a weight on his shoulders.

Tom felt something lodge itself at the back of his throat. *This* was Lord Voldemort’s legacy, in the end – the haunted expression on Harry’s face. The same expression, he suspected, that many hundreds or even thousands of people had worn.

That, perhaps, was true power. To have such a visible impact on so many people’s lives, to leave shadows behind on the faces of even the brightest people.

It was not desirable in the slightest. It was not *great.*

“I don’t know,” Harry responded.

If that response was not awful enough as it was, with everything that it implied, Harry went on to do an inexplicable, gut-wrenching thing; the boy stepped forward and embraced him. Tom stiffened by instinct, but the boy’s body heat seeped into him, grounding and so very *nice*. He could not help but find himself relaxing in the grasp, could not help but hold Harry as much as the boy was holding him.

“Why do you – why you do this?” *Tolerate me, show me kindness – like me, even?*

“Hate doesn’t drive out hate,” Harry mumbled into his shoulder.

It was such a simple answer, one expected of the naïve and childish, of those who had not yet stepped out and seen the world for what it was – cruel. Yet, it seemed it was still true. Tom only had to look as far as the boy in his arms.

He could not say how long they stood in the corridor like that. It was unimportant; instead, it was the comfort of another person's warmth that was important. It made the horrific recollection of memories and dreams better, just a little bit.

Eventually, Tom pulled them apart; though perhaps *peeled himself off Harry* would be a better descriptor. He'd apparently been stooping, limbs encasing Harry's shorter frame. He said, attempting humour, "This has been a very happy birthday conversation, but I'd like some breakfast."

Harry smiled at him, patting his shoulder a little awkwardly. "Mister birthday boy, I hope you realise coffee isn't breakfast."

"It is if I declare it is."

Harry rolled his eyes, and the easy banter between them began to flow once more.

"And the world spins on its axis because you told it to. Sure, handsome."

"*Handsome,* you say?"

Harry flushed a delectable colour. "Stop smirking, it's awfully… it's unbecoming."

Tom was quite certain that was not what Harry had originally intended on saying, and a flutter went through him at the thought. *Handsome,* and he'd undoubtedly been about to say *attractive;* if only Harry would admit it.

Fantasies crosses Tom's mind. He imagined the combined heat of their bodies, exploring mouths and a steadying hand at the small of Harry's back, pulling them together, deepening their kiss…

Stop, Harry had uttered, and so instead of any of that, he teased in response, and the banter continued as they walked to the Great Hall.

All wasn't right in the world, his fears were not vanquished, but Tom felt the weight in his chest lessen a little; felt his mouth upturning with an ease unimaginable a mere month ago.

*

They didn't end up in Diagon Alley later that day. They walked past the boundaries of the school's anti-Apparition wards, and Tom hesitated grabbing Harry's arm for a Side-Along.

Diagon Alley was in London, he'd suddenly realised. It was easy to forget, because there was never any of the tense atmosphere in the Alley, none of the crumbled buildings and fearful faces. The Wizarding World generally acted with complete ignorance to the Muggle one.

Perhaps, there was no real weight to the thought. The Germans had ceased fire upon London over two years ago.

Still, Diagon Alley was in *London.*

His hesitation didn't go unnoticed. It was a little concerning that Harry could read him so well, but Tom was mostly just thankful for it; he didn't need to explain what he didn't want to explain.

"I was looking forward to flaunting my prowess with Apparition," Harry said lightly, "but I haven't been to Hogsmeade in this timeline yet."

"I'm amenable," Tom replied, and then found himself frowning. "You were planning to take us to Diagon in *one* jump?"

Harry raised his eyebrow. "You're doubting me?"

Tom made a vague annoyed noise at the back of his throat. *Doubt Harry* – no. He'd never been given any reason to do so. He did not think himself capable of holding doubt when it came to Harry at all.

"It's difficult for anyone to Apparate more than a few hundred miles at once, or so I've read," he said.

Harry shrugged, his gaze becoming slightly unfocused. Tom had come to realise he was recalling memories for his past life whenever he did that.

"I Side-Alonged someone a similar distance only a few weeks after I Apparated for the first time," was all Harry said – as if that was not remarkable.

Decision swept through Tom's mind in a split-second.

"You're going to teach me, then," he said.

Harry blinked at him, slowly. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“You said you had experience teaching. Besides, you can’t be worse than Instructor Warty Nose.”

Harry snorted but still looked unconvinced, so Tom added, “The Ministry doesn’t actually track Apparitions, you know. They only know when unlicensed people Splinch themselves and go crying for help.”

“I’m very aware,” Harry said. “But I don’t – what if *you* Splinch yourself? I don’t know the reversal spell, which is really a terrible oversight, considering…” he trailed off into obscurity.

“I won’t Splinch myself,” Tom replied, vaguely offended. “I’m not insufficiently determined.”

Harry bit his lip. “Alright,” he said, and looked furtively up and down the path they were on. As expected, it was empty. “But if anything unfortunate happens, don’t hold me liable. You’re your own harbinger of disaster.”

“What little faith you have.”

Harry ignored his comment.

“How did your first Apparition lesson go? You were all grumpy if I recall correctly – nothing happened at all?”

“*Grumpy?”*

Harry rolled his eyes and continued, after realising Tom wasn’t going to give explicit confirmation to a failure.

“I suspect you’re right about being sufficiently determined.” Harry’s lips upturned, as if sharing a joke with himself. “I imagine it wasn’t difficult for you to easily fixate your focus to the hoop, either. From there, you have to remove all doubts in your mind about your ability to Apparate, remove all hesitation regarding the rather nasty feeling of compression that accompanies it. You have to twist on the spot, and at the same time, feel your way through nothingness-”

“Never mind,” Tom interrupted, the Apparition instructor’s droning voice replaying in his mind in time with Harry’s explanation. “You *are* just as bad as Warty Nose.”

To Tom's great annoyance, Harry didn't look the least bothered by the insult. Instead, he grinned. *Nonsensically*.

"You know, you *are* thick, sometimes. You truly can't see what you're doing wrong?" he asked.

Tom scoffed. "I haven't even showed-"

"You're impatient."

Tom closed his mouth and hoped he wasn't flushed red.

"You have to move with *deliberation*. *Careful* consideration of *exactly* what you're doing. Your decision to Apparate can't be anything born from impatience – hasty, impulsive, overeager, et cetera."

"Shut up," Tom muttered. He could kick himself for not realising it sooner, but he only squared his shoulders, allowing resolve to race through him. "I'm going to get it on the first try now, you watch."

Harry looked extremely amused, but he sounded genuine when he said, *'I'm sure you will',* so Tom let it slip. He walked a dozen paces beyond Harry and then turned back around.

Destination, Determination, Deliberation – Instructor Warty Nose's voice intoned dully in his mind.

There wasn't a hoop for him to concentrate on this time, but his destination was nonetheless clear. He was sufficiently determined – far more than sufficiently. It was just *deliberation* that he'd been missing.

Tom employed an Occlumentic technique to lock his impatience away and took a deep breath, resolved not to make his words a lie. He *would* get this on the first try. He only needed to move with care, steadiness, feel himself through nothingness, embrace the full-body compression… Tom twisted on the spot.

He heard the telltale *crack,* saw blackness for a split-second while the breath was knocked out of him.

Harry was suddenly standing barely a foot away from him, looking vaguely alarmed by the unexpected proximity. Tom hadn't meant to land *quite* so close to him, but that detail hardly mattered.

"I did it," he grinned. "I told you."

"I never doubt you," Harry said, a smile on his own face.

There was a pause. Harry's eyes tracked downwards, to his lips. Tom barely dared to be breathe, silently begging the boy to move closer, to fulfil his fantasies, to slot their lips together and give him a taste of victory-

Harry blinked and stepped away instead.

Tom felt a wave of disappointment flush through him, eroding away the unexpected burst of happiness. He cleared his throat, forcing his facial expression blank.

"You know, you haven't actually proved *you* can Apparate," he said, hoping his tone didn't betray any of his thoughts.

It was clear Harry wanted him, too – why was he denying himself it?

It was *infuriating,* though he supposed the answer was obvious. Nonsensical, too. Harry was comfortably enough to do *this* with him, had no qualms about acting as a – a companion, a *friend.* Why was this so much different?

Harry, apparently oblivious to the desire that grew alongside his frustration, rolled his eyes. Without warning, there was a loud *crack,* and the air in front of Tom was empty.

"I was definitely lying to you," Harry said from behind him, sarcastically. Tom turned around to find that the boy had his arms folded across his chest. "Now, let's go."

Harry took a step forward as if he wanted to *walk* the rest of the way to Hogsmeade.

What an idiot, Tom thought fondly, and twisted on the spot again instead. High Street came into his view a split-second later.

He probably should've chosen somewhere other than the main street to Apparate into; he almost landed on top of an old lady whose arms were full of grocery bags. Tom offered an insincere but charming smile with his equally insincere apology, which, predictably, was gobbled up.

"Just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *should*," Harry muttered crossly, dropping his vice grip on Tom's arm. He must have extraordinary reflexes, to have tagged along last-second.

"Oh, hush," Tom said.

“You’re terrible, by the way. I’m nauseous.”

Tom peered more closely at Harry. He personally felt perfectly fine, beyond a little breathless. Harry did look a little green, however.

“Don’t blame me for your incompetencies.”

“My incompetencies? *Mine?* You’re the one who Apparated, you complete-”

Tom laughed, and took long strides to flee from Harry’s indignant tirade.

He turned into *Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop.* He wasn’t as Knutless as he had been six years ago – extortion could be quite fun – but that wasn’t to say he had much he was willing to spare. A new quill couldn’t wait, however; the charms holding his current one together became less effective with each reapplication.

Harry caught up to him ten seconds later, prefacing his presence with, “You are an asshole.”

“But a handsome one, right?”

Harry mumbled something inaudible and turned away, pretending to be extremely interested in an overpriced peacock-feathered quill. Tom could only shake his head, unsure about what to do with all the *warmth* in his chest. He felt he was overflowing with it, which didn’t make any sense at all. He had just been *insulted,* yet he rejoiced in the familiarity between them rather than felt upset.

Desire, fondness, Tom decided as he hummed and hawed over plainer but much more affordable quills, *made one completely and utterly illogical.* His point was only proven by the fact that he didn’t mind whatsoever.

“Do you like sugar quills?” Harry asked, coming up behind him. “I noted Honeydukes still exists.”

“Never had one,” Tom replied, gazing between two quills. It was a trade-off between spending extravagance and reliability. “The idea is absurd. They last one tenth the time as proper quills of the same price, and they *encourage* you to transfer saliva onto your writing utensils. What if it drops onto your parchment? Completely unsanitary. Utterly disgusting.”

“That explains a lot,” Harry muttered. Tom turned sharply, meeting his bright green eyes. “I mean, you’re not very ‘*sugar and spice and all things nice*’, are you?”

“I assure you, I can be *perfectly nice* when I want to be,” Tom replied.

The innuendo was completely lost on him.

“You’re the sort of person to unironically ask for a cup of coffee ‘*as black as your soul*’,” the boy continued. “I rather think-”

“Is this what you do on everyone’s birthdays?” Tom interrupted, unable to discern if he was more irritated or amused. “Insult them?”

“I think you’d like acid pops.” Tom narrowed his eyes. “See? You’re very sour, very biting.”

Tom really wasn’t sure what had inspired this current mood of Harry’s.

Exasperated, he picked up the quill in front of him with no further preamble. He stalked to the end of the store and thrust it before the shopkeeper.

“Two Galleons,” she said, but before Tom could fish for the gold in his pockets, Harry had dropped two pieces into the girl’s outstretched hand.

“As compensation for my insults,” Harry provided.

Tom allowed the girl to shove the gold in the till, but once they were outside again, he said, “I hope you know you cannot *buy* my forgiveness.”

Harry rolled his eyes. He was very fond of that motion, Tom had noticed.

“Relax, you’re so dramatic. I think-”

“I’m beginning to believe you should stop doing that.”

“-that you’re more suited to be an actor than a Dark Lord. You could *really* play up the grandiose speeches and pretentious airs you’re so fond of, as an actor. As a Dark Lord, not so much. They were counter-productive in real life, you know? They directly contributed to my survival on more than one occasion. On stage-”

“If you say one more word on this *demeaning topic,* I will make you regret it.”

“See what I mean?” Harry grinned, ducking away from the Stinging Hex that Tom cast at him. “That was your first legal spell without the Trace, by the way. Congratulations. Let’s go to Honeydukes.”

Tom scowled.

He was not quite sure how he exited the sweetshop fifteen minutes later with a sugar quill in his pocket. Harry was beaming at him, and that was definitely uncorrelated.

At least, he thought, *he hadn’t been the one to waste the money, and he was also under no obligation to use or consume it.*

(Of course, a couple of days later when the term had started back up again, he would give in and realise that spun sugar was a delicacy of which he had been deprived.)

After Honeydukes, they took a stroll up around the town of Hogsmeade, while Harry provided commentary.

“The field over there,” he said. “In the early seventies, they’ll build a shack on it. All the villagers will think it’s haunted and call it the Shrieking Shack, but really, it’ll just house a werewolf on the full moons-”

“*Excuse me?*”

“It’ll be connected to a tunnel that leads to the school. To prevent students from going through it, and you know, being mauled by a werewolf, they’ll plant a Whomping Willow of the entrance. I flew – well, my best friend did the flying – we crashed an enchanted car into it in second year, and nearly died. My Nimbus – that’s a broomstick company, by the way, they don’t exist yet though – got smashed by it in third year when I fainted because Dementors invaded our Quidditch game. I nearly died then too. I fell, like, one hundred feet through the air. And-”

“Harry,” Tom said. Half of Harry’s sentences during his story-times seemed to start or end in *I nearly died.* It was disturbing.

“Mhm?”

“Sometimes I think you’re a little barmy.”

Harry laughed, the crinkle near his eye on full display, his eyes the ever-vibrant shade of emerald green. Tom thought that perhaps, there was reason in his own madness – the madness that was his fondness.

“Other times, I’m shocked you’re still alive.”

“You’re certainly not alone with that one,” Harry said, and the atmosphere became immediately more sombre.

“I’m glad for it, though,” Tom said.

“Yeah?”

Tom reached for Harry’s hand, following a sudden and irresistible urge that had reared up inside him. For all the superfluous power and that Lord Voldemort might have wielded, he would still be distinctly *lacking.* Lacking Harry, that was.

“Very, very glad,” Tom answered.

Harry glanced down at their entwinned hands, and thankfully did not separate them. He did stop outside of a second-hand store, however, and say this: “Madam Puddifoot’s will be here in fifty years. It’ll be the haunt for happy couples.”

He then hastily pulled Tom along, as though he couldn’t escape the memory of this *Madam Puddifoot’s* quick enough.

Tom found himself a mixture of jealous and pleased. Jealous, because that behaviour surely meant Harry had been *attached* before – of course he had, he was attractive. Pleased, because that attachment was definitely well-and-truly over, if that was his reaction. It wouldn’t do to have competitors, especially ones that didn’t even exist yet.

“Pink and frills and laces are really not my style. I mean, it’s reminiscent of Umbridge, for one.”

Tom had never mistaken Harry for a pink-and-frills-and-laces man, and he wasn’t sure how anyone could’ve, but it was all the better for him, really.

He occupied three shops for the remainder of time they spent in Hogsmeade. In *Rabnott’s Robes,* the more upmarket of the two robes stores in Hogsmeade*,* Tom forced Harry into renting (buying was beyond expensive) an absolutely *stunning* piece that he knew he would be spending the evening drooling over.

After selecting a robe, Harry said he needed to run an errand. Tom found himself spending the next hour in *Tomes and Scrolls,* flipping through pages in the history and political sector of the store. He purchased a large, weathered book titled *The Wizengamot: A Deep Dive.* It was extremely informative and comprehensive, and not to mention necessary, given the change in his career paths.

Finally, he met up with Harry in the *Three Broomsticks,* where they shared lunch and a butterbeer. Tom had not wanted to try butterbeer, but Harry had already paid, so he couldn't exactly rescind the order.

He was surprised to find it pleasant. The drink seemed to warm him from the inside. The sweetness, creaminess and fizz were perfectly balanced.

"It's not terrible. I can understand why public sentiment is so overwhelming positive," he said, because Harry was watching him expectantly.

"You *really* like it, then," Harry said, poorly restraining his laughter.

"Why do I bother speaking, if you're going to draw a conclusion alternate to what I said?"

Harry was correct, though. It was almost as good as the warmth that had seeped into him at their embrace; almost as good as the warmth that filled his chest when Harry did this – laugh at something he'd said.

"You speak like-" the boy gestured nonsensically. "Anyway, I've been meaning to ask. What are your career plans, now?"

Tom procured the tome he'd bought from his pockets, placed it on the table beside his plate – roast lamb seasoned with garlic, rosemary and thyme – and resized it with a flick of his wand. Harry squinted as he read the title upside-down.

"Ah," Harry said. "That's what you speak like. A politician."

Tom stared.

"You know. Lot of flowery language and lies."

Well. He wasn't wrong, per se.

"Or maybe that's just part of being an act-"

”No.”

Harry slapped a hand over the title of the book, grinning. “Anyway. For the love of Merlin, don’t make it more corrupt than it already is. You don’t know how many bones I have to pick with the Ministry on the whole.”

Tom twisted his lips into a wry smile. “Excellent,” he said.

Harry stared back at him, uncomprehendingly. A forkful of slow-cooked beef was half-way to his mouth.

“*Excellent?”*

“I’ve figured you out,” Tom began to explain.

“Woe awaits the world, truly.”

Tom rolled his eyes, insufferable fondness seeping into the action.

“You despise injustice, corruption, immorality; and the Ministry, especially the Wizengamot, is chock-full of it. Don’t you want to fix it all?”

Harry coughed unbidden, and hurriedly placed his fork back down on his plate. “I had no intention of joining the Ministry, much less the Wizengamot. I wouldn’t last five minutes before telling the entire cabinet to go fuck themselves.”

“Refreshing,” Tom commented. “But undoubtedly counter-productive.”

Harry snorted. “I honestly don’t even understand the Wizengamot. It seemed to me that it functions as both court and parliament, which *surely* can’t be the case.”

Tom smiled. “No, you’re correct. There is no separation of powers in the Wizarding World.”

“That’s fucking *awful.”*

Tom continued, still smiling. “Our world is one where the people who make the laws are the same people as the ones who interpret them and make judgements with them. It’s fortunate that all of our Ministers are incompetent, handed everything by nepotism; but it does beg the question, what would happen if someone with a *brain* sat in the seat of ultimate power? What could they write into the law, into

the history books; and what could they *erase?* What *couldn't* they do, when everyone else runs around in circles of their own incompetencies, tails caught between their legs?"

Tom leaned forwards across the table, wandlessly levitating his plate out of his way as he did so. His hand found Harry's forearm, fingers splayed across it in a practised motion. In a lower voice, as if divulging a secret, he continued.

"I paint you a picture of the future; do you enjoy it, Harry? Or do you wish to rise in the ranks and exert your own influence, your own power, to forever hold dictatorship out of their grasp?"

Harry looked down at the fingers on his forearm. His face was blank, but there was something sharp in his eye. Tom smiled internally, thinking that it must be determination, cunning – but then Harry laughed.

"You really are very theatrical," he said. "You can just ask me to join the Ministry with you, you know."

Tom stared, leaning back in his chair, fingers slipping off Harry's forearm. It could not be that simple.

He bit down his disbelief.

"*Will* you, then?"

"I'll think on it," Harry answered.

That wasn't a yes, but it also wasn't as clear of a *no* as it had been before. Tom tilted his head, curiously.

Asking.

It didn't work at Wool's where asking only lead to the opposite of the desired outcome. *Can you move back, I'm nearing the cliff, Dennis, Amy?*

No; he'd had to save himself with his magic, and they'd had to be *shown, threatened, terrified* before they'd learnt to leave him alone.

He hadn't tried *asking* Slytherin House to do anything, moving straight to excessive force and magic. It would be laughable to do anything but.

Can you stop calling me a mudblood, Mr with-the-shiny-prefect-badge-and-three-hundred-years-of-family-legacy? Can you stop upturning my trunk

and spilling Lake water over my mattress, most-kind-and-loving-and-dear-dormmates?

Undoubtedly, that would've be suicide.

Harry was strange in that he was entirely unalike all that he knew. Strange, but delightful.

"It's not necessary, but I'd suggest aiming for a History NEWT. Self-studied, of course. Binns is useless, I can't wait until he rolls over and dies-"

Harry burst into unexpected laughter.

"You'd think we'd free of Binns in death, wouldn't you?"

Tom blinked for several seconds, processing, and he felt his mouth fall open in horror.

"You've got to be *kidding,*" he uttered. "He comes back as a *ghost* – and, what? They let him continue to teach? Nobody exorcised him? *Nobody?*"

Through his laughter, Harry said, "Apparently not."

"This is not funny," Tom stated. "History of Magic is a fascinating subject, it's just – *stop laughing."*

"History of Magic is a fascinating subject, he says," Harry parroted. "Please tell me that was a bad joke."

"It's the *teacher,*" Tom emphasized. "He hasn't changed what he taught since the Middle Ages, I'm sure – it's all so outdated, and he lingers on the most tangential topics ever. The subject is actually integral – it's so important to learn the origins of all the tensions that have lingered between factions of our society for centuries."

Harry had finally stopped laughing. "Alright, I'll take your word for it," he said. "But just so you know, a History NEWT is never going to happen. I got a 'D' on my OWLs."

Tom stared. "You absolutely did not."

"Well, I fainted and missed, like, three quarters of the exam," Harry mused, "but I didn't really care. I wanted to become an Auror, and obviously History isn't a requirement."

Tom pressed his lips into a thin line.

“You don’t want to be an Auror,” he said decisively. “You’d be enforcing law that you just said you didn’t like, acting on the whims of people you don’t like. You wouldn’t have the power to change any of that. In the Wizengamot, however, you could-”

“Tom,” Harry interrupted.

“-rise above them, make the changes you want to see in the world. *I* plan to come Minister in fourteen years after graduation-” *just to spite Slughorn, who thought it’d take fifteen or even twenty, “*-and I’d listen to your ideas. I’d find a way to make them appealing to the old Lords who wish for no change, stuck in their ways and clinging to inherited fortunes and-”

“*Tom*,” Harry said, more insistently. “I don’t want to become an Auror, anymore.”

Tom blinked.

“I took on a few cases with the Department after the war but soon realised I didn’t have the passion. My whole life up until that point had been orchestrated to defeat Voldemort; I wanted to step away from all that. I’ve been thinking recently that I want to get a Defence Mastery abroad, and then applying for the Defence post at Hogwarts.”

Tom bit the inside of his cheek, contemplating.

Now that he thought about it, he could not imagine anyone better suited to the role of Defence professor than Harry. He was certainly talented at the subject, and he had all the right instincts. He would be exceptionally good at guiding younger generations, and he had just proven he was more than capable of teaching difficult concepts to difficult people.

“I have full faith that you’d be a wonderful Defence professor,” Tom replied, somewhat begrudgingly. “But might I tempt you otherwise? When I become Minister, I’ll appoint you as my Senior Undersecretary-”

“*Pardon?”*

“I’m sure you’ll find it rewarding, having the influence to make the changes you want to see in wizarding society. You could even argue in separation of the judicial and parliamentary powers,” Tom added,

knowing the argument would be particularly persuasive for Harry.

He wasn't wrong. Harry paused, and strummed his fingers across the table.

"Perhaps," the boy said after a second of silence. "But, as I said. I think I'd be utterly hopeless at politics. I don't have the patience. I don't have the ability to grit my teeth, step back and treat everything – the most *basic* of things that should be common decency – with a cool, collected air. I don't understand all the nuances in speech-"

"I beg to differ," Tom interrupted. "You picked apart all my words for weeks. You were cool and collected with me – for the most part. I was equally impressed as I was irritated. You seemed unflappable."

Harry paused, looking at him with faint surprised etched over his face. As if he were surprised that Tom held such a high opinion of him.

"I'm not unflappable," he said eventually.

"Oh, I know," Tom replied. Harry was in a lot of departments, but with *this,* with the faint blush on his cheeks – he was very effected. It was delightful. "You get very flustered when you consider how impossibly handsome I am."

Harry shook his head, amusement seeping through his expression. The blush had become more coloured.

"You need a lesson in humility," he said.

"A fool's errand."

Harry's lips twitched. "I suspect so. Besides, I rather like you as is. Somehow."

Warmth spread from his chest to his fingertips to his toes, and Tom found himself smiling. He'd never been told that before; it was his intelligence, his power, his false air of niceties and charm that drew others in.

The winter wind could not pierce him when they eventually exited The Three Broomsticks and made their way back to the castle.

*

The unused classroom where his birthday party was being thrown had been completely transformed. Tom would go as far to say that he was *impressed* – probably the highest compliment that he'd ever give Abraxas.

All the desks had been vanished from the room, replaced with one long table that was draped in an emerald tablecloth. From far away, it appeared to shimmer, but up close, it became apparent that it was textured with gold embellishing to appear like a snake's skin. There were an assortment of finger-foods on top, set out buffet-style, some of which Tom didn't recognise at all.

He presumed they were traditional pureblood wizarding delicacies. He wouldn't know; he'd only been to one traditional event before, a ball hosted by the Malfoys in the previous year's autumn break.

Around the sides of the room were golden ornate chairs with plush emerald cushions and honey-coloured wood tables. It was quite casual; they could be moved around quite easily, so groups could form and break away.

Covering all the stone walls were luxurious green fabrics with golden accents that shimmered under warm candlelight. On the wall opposite the doorway, "HAPPY SEVENTEENTH, TOM!" had been spelled out in gold on the fabric.

The enthusiasm in the exclamation mark was nauseating, but overall, Tom really liked what had been done to the room. There was ample space to move around, the chairs and tables surprisingly not taking too much room. An Expansion Charm had probably been cast over the entire interior dimensions – he hadn't really been paying attention when he'd entered. It seemed unlike Abraxas had the magical prowess to pull *that* off, so the credit probably went to Slughorn.

Distantly, Tom wondered if the professor was still going to act skittish with him.

Most of his mental capacity was taken up by one thought, however: when was *Harry* going to arrive?

Tom hoped he'd be one of the first few, so the boy would be able to see all the room's decorations before they began to get obstructed by people flitting about. He was anticipating Harry's reaction; he imagined the look of awe, the disbelieving blink, the slight smile that

would appear as Harry shook his head.

Alas, people were already beginning to stream in, stealing his attention with '*happy birthday*'s and attempts to make conversation. Randolph, for instance, who looked constipated about something or the other.

"Happy birthday, my Lord," the pallid-skinned boy greeted, handing him a large rectangular gift, black wrapped in gold ribbon. It was pureblood tradition to wrap gifts in paper and ribbons of the giver's family colours.

"Thank you," Tom replied, his features forced into the charming smile that the school on a whole knew. He fiddled with ribbon, letting it slip. "But there's no need to be so formal at a celebration, is there?"

"My apologies, Tom," Randolph said, swallowing visibly.

Tom didn't acknowledge him. Instead, he pulled Randolph's gift out of the shell of wrapping paper, and stared.

Lestrange had gifted him a camera. Presumably one that produced Wizarding photographs, not that Tom could tell the difference. He'd never been interested in snapping photographs of poor, orphaned Tom Marvolo Riddle, thinking he would soon discard that history from himself.

He wasn't quite sure what Lestrange had been thinking – probably nothing at all. It was probably just gifted because it was expensive. Tom turned and placed the gift on a side table, alongside a few others he had already unravelled.

Randolph watched his actions, anxiousness dripping from his person. He glanced around the room, and then gazed up and down at Tom's robes.

"I'm surprised you went with gold, but it looks very fine on you," Randolph said.

Tom nodded; he knew that. His hair was the sort of dark that paired better with silver, but his eyes were a slightly softer brown could compliment gold well.

He'd designed his robes with that in mind. The once plain, cheap, second-hand robes had been handled with his best Transfiguration efforts. The sleeves were flowy, elegant, intricate golden designs

tracing down to meet a gold cuff. It was form-fitting, golden edges to accentuate the look, and the steep V neckline showed off a teasing strip of skin.

Tom was *very* pleased with the look. There was absolutely no way *handsome* was not going to drip from Harry's mouth.

"Thank you," Tom replied, graciously. He glanced to the door; still no Harry in sight. "You look… inspired."

Randolph was wearing a Slytherin colour palette. It might've looked stylish, had he chosen to wear a darker green robe instead of a black one with dark green sashes. Alas, he hadn't had that sense. All Tom could think was that Randolph looked like he was wearing a variant of their school uniform.

"I've never worn it before," Randolph supplied, clearly having missed the underlying insult. He sounded far too confident and prideful. "You know how offensive it is, to wear formal robes twice. I wouldn't pay you that indignity, so I-"

Tom momentarily considered telling Randolph that his own robes had been recycled more times than he had fingers, each time expertly disguised by Transfiguration. He decided against it, however. Any embarrassment Randolph might feel wouldn't outweigh his own.

"-owled Mother, and she sent my sizing off to *Madam Blanchet's* in France. She's the best seamstress this side of the equator. I got my shoes from-"

It was so incredibly easy to lose interest. Randolph clearly spent too much time with Abraxas, if he felt inclined to incessantly waffle on about having the best of this and that. Tom regretted forcing them together more often earlier that month, in his own attempts to escape the blonde.

Smiling delicately, he began to excuse himself under the pretence of needing to greet the seventh-year Rosier twins, who had just walked through the door.

"Wait, Tom, I have something important to say," Randolph said, his voice rising a notch or two in what appeared to be desperation.

Tom resisted the urge to do something very violent.

"Next time, *lead* with the important information, why don't we?"

“Of course.” Randolph cleared his throat and fidgeted minutely. “Forgive if I overstep, but I have your best interests in mind, so please hear me out.”

Tom raised an eyebrow and said nothing. Randolph took that as an invitation to hurry on.

“Your routine has changed. Your attitude – towards us Knights-” Tom distinctly heard ‘*me’*, “-and our goals has changed. You haven’t been present very much this holiday, either. It comes across to me as strange, and I would like to express my suspicion towards the cause for these changes.”

Tom stared, his face blank.

“This is about Harry Evans, isn’t it?”

Randolph looked incredibly relieved that Tom had understood through all of his babbling. “I mean no offence, but this is most unlike you, to prioritise a ba- Gryffindor over greater things.”

It took all of his effort to keep his face impassive.

“I thought I made it very clear,” Tom replied, an undercurrent of threat in his otherwise lofty tone. “But in case I didn’t, I’ll reiterate *one more time*. You will not insult him. You will not make snide comments about him. You will not antagonise him. You will not even *think* of him unless it is-” *with reverence in your mind* “-to reflect upon your narrow-mindedness.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you for *days,* but you’ve been gone, Tom–”

“Is that understood?”

“He’s been dosing you with Amortentia!” Randolph burst out.

Tom paused, and then he began to laugh.

It was true that Harry thought him handsome. It was also true that Harry was not a man driven by his lust. He was driven by his morals, and on some occasions, his anger.

“If Harry had any bad intentions towards me, if he were working against me, planning to remove me of my free will – he would not fiddle with the likes of *love potions.*”

No. Instead, his diary would have a Basilisk fang stabbed through it.

“In the unlikely case that this *is* all a genuine mistake underpinned by an authentic interest in my welfare,” Tom continued sagely. “I’ll offer you some advice. Don’t make an enemy of Harry.”

Randolph scoffed. “You don’t think he’s potioned you, but you still think he’s dangerous? He couldn’t throw a Dark curse if it’d save his life.”

Tom frowned, suspicious. That was awfully specific, but Randolph didn’t blush or give any sign of realising a slip in his speech.

Though, that didn’t mean much. He probably did not realise there *had* been a slip.

“I think Harry is incredibly kind,” Tom settled with replying. He thought of *try for some remorse, it’s all you have left* – and then he thought of Voldemort’s body falling. “But kindness has its limits. You’d be unwise to test them.”

Randolph made some other disbelieving noise, but Tom had enough of the conversation. He left the boy at the side of the room, not before reinforcing how stupid he believed the idea of *Amortentia* to be.

No longer obviously occupied, Tom was greeted with ‘*happy birthdays’* for the next several minutes by the rest of his guests, gifts handed to him truthfully faster than he could keep up. It was irritating that he was expected to unwrap everything then and there, in fact – but it was customary. Scrutinising gifts was a way for gossiping high society to tear apart loyalties and grievances.

It was something he would’ve enjoyed picking apart himself, only a month ago. He would’ve looked at the joint gift received from the seventh- and sixth-year Lowe sisters and scoffed, deciding he’d never give them time of day in any of the years to come.

He still wouldn’t give them any time of day, but he was less begrudged by it all than he knew he would’ve been a month ago. Now – now he just wanted Harry to walk through the door.

He cast a Tempus in a moment of reprieve and frowned. *Ten past eight;* Harry was late. Irritation was beginning to grow alongside concern.

When Harry *did* walk through the door a couple of minutes later, he immediately forgot everything, including the conversation he’d been engaged with between the three Ravenclaws he’d invited; Pyrites, Dawlish and Fancourt.

It was one of *those* moments that appeared only in fiction books. The entire world seemed to stop around him, as if all time and space were centred around this – Harry turning his head, meeting his eyes across the room, and smiling.

He had done something to his hair. Dark, luscious curls sat upon his head, endowing him with an air of youthful elegance. He had put on eyeshadow, too, for there was a shimmer above his eyes. Tom couldn't determine the exact colour from across the room, but he suspected it to be gold.

Then, there was the robe. Tom had picked it himself earlier that day, had fantasized over this very moment since he'd seen Harry walk out of the fitting room, but he'd never imagined *this* level of breathtaking.

The emerald-green shade that merged into a dark, forest green as it feel to the floor brought out his vibrant eyes. The patterning, geometric around the cuffs and in the sash, glimmered a molten gold under the candlelight. The golden belt clinched his waist, emphasizing the glory of his lean figure.

All toll, in the backdrop of Tom's emerald green-and-gold banners, Harry looked to be royalty entering his throne room.

Tom would not be able to look away if he'd wanted to.

He drank in the entire picture, feeling himself fall prey to an unquenchable thirst. *Ethereal, otherworldly, a boy who'd crossed the bounds of time itself*, he could not help but think – and then the moment was broken.

The world started spinning again. Harry was greeted by Abraxas and consequently looked away. Dawlish asked him a question. He registered the buzz of nearby conversations, the clinking of shot glasses, the accompanying loud laughter.

Tom excused himself from the conversation without answering Dawlish, a graceful smile on his lips that only Harry should've been privy to. They met halfway across the room; Harry must've made a similar excuse to escape Abraxas' hold.

"Hi." Harry sounded a little breathless with awe, and it stoked Tom's ego massively.

"Hi."

“You look – well, don’t get a big head-” *too late for that, my dear Harry,* Tom thought, “-but there’s no other way to put it – you look like you’ve been fashioned by the Gods.”

Tom had no belief in a God or Gods, but the sentiment was even better than *handsome.* Tom could not help the shiver of pleasure than ran through him.

“I could say similar,” he praised. “You look gorgeous.” *You look so stunning that the world stopped, for just a moment.*

Harry flushed and Tom considered adding the last part to see the red deepen. Harry spoken again before he could.

“Thank you.” A pause. “I’m sorry for being late, Nate gave me some hair gel and – well, I knew it would be an effort, but I didn’t properly account for it. And I know I already wished it, but happy seventeenth birthday, again,” he said, all in a rush. “I’ve got you a gift, of course, but I didn’t realise it was the done thing to open them all now-”

“I’ll receive it after,” Tom obliged, unable to stop a smile from seizing his expression.

Following an impulse, he draped an arm around Harry’s shoulders, pulling him in for closer, side-by-side conversation. His fingers danced on Harry’s deltoid and delighted in the wiry muscle they found. Into the shell of Harry’s ear, he murmured, “Lestrange let it slip that you can’t cast a Dark curse to save your life.”

Harry turned his head, vibrant green eyes staring into his brown ones. A pinning gaze. “Is that a question or a statement?”

“A question.”

"Well, he's wrong," Harry answered. "I've done quite a lot of things I'm not too proud of. Anger does not becometh a man, or something."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "You're avoiding the question."

Harry sighed, reciprocating the gesture at last, a hand snaking around his waist. A thrill went through Tom; they were standing in the centre of the room, surrounded by the colour scheme that matched Harry’s eyes, Harry’s robes, and they were holding each other like *this*. There was little doubt that Harry was his centrepiece, and that fact was starting to garner attention.

He smiled; *perfect.* It should be clear to everyone that Harry was above the rest of them.

“He accused me of dosing you with Amortentia,” Harry said. “Which, by the way-”

“Is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” Tom supplied.

Harry peered at him. “Well, yes, and it *is* untrue, but I admit I’m a little surprised you think so.”

Unconsciously, Tom gripped Harry’s shoulder more strongly. It was true he’d taken an immense likely to Harry that might be suspicious to an outsider – that he might even find suspicious himself, if he had not been so sure of Harry’s character and the inability of Amortentia to conjure feelings *this* complex, this *warm*.

“Don’t be,” he answered. He made a ‘continue on’ gesture. “What did Lestrange do – because I’m quite certain his own incriminating implication is that he didn’t leave it there.”

“I suppose, at the end of the day, he did nothing beyond irritate me,” Harry replied, and despite everything, Tom found himself smiling as he read between the lines. Of course Harry would annihilate Randolph in a duel – Harry was matched with *him.*

Unfortunately, before he could press for details, or otherwise demand that they start a friendly duel right then and there (Harry had been *incredibly* attractive in the first), their conversation was unceremoniously ended by an unwelcome arrival.

“Happy birthday, Tom,” Jerome said for the second time that night. He outstretched his hand to Harry. “I’m Jerome – Jerome Rosier. My sister and I share Defense with you, but I don’t think we’ve properly introduced.”

Harry scrutinised Jerome for just a second too long before shaking the boy’s hand. “Well met,” he said. “Druella is your sister’s name, isn’t it? Head Girl? Merrythought paired us once, I think.”

When that turn of conversation ended, after Jerome had fetched his sister, officially introduced her and a short discussion of Defence class, Harry turned back to him, a frown on his face.

“The Rosiers are quite prominent in this day and age, I’ve noticed,” he said. “The French branch are members of Grindelwald’s Alliance,

Druella's Head Girl, and I think I saw their parents' names in papers relating to the Wizengamot, a few weeks ago. It's strange – the entire bloodline's extinct in my day."

"Oh. Is that because of – hello, Clyde."

It quickly became a pattern, that their conversation was put on hold. Either by gift-givers, by a few doing the *smart* thing and offering Harry pleasantries, or by a few unwise Knights who opened their insufferable mouths and made many implications about the boy's presence.

Harry's commentary in their moments of reprieve-

"*Spitting image of Walden Macnair. In manner and appearance. Almost makes me want to throw him across the room, too.*"

"*Well, now I know why Marcus Flint was so wholly unattractive and unpleasant. It's not Troll blood, it's just an unfortunate inheritance from his grandpappy."*

"Goyle thinks his bloodline is so impressive and noble and whatever, does he? The most important thing his grandson ever managed to do was eat a cupcake laced with Sleeping Draught."

"*Lowe – Sinistra, I think – writes a book on pureblood supremacy called The Muggle Conspiracy. How about I conspire to pull a stick out of her ass instead, much more productive…*"

-was the only reason why Tom wasn't bored by the repetition of it all. Gossip was of no use to him unless it was of a certain calibre, incriminating or scandalous, but Harry's talk fell into a new acceptable category: amusing anecdotes regarding the future.

Tom found himself being quite petty in return, sharing some of the lesser secrets and blackmail material he'd learned over the years in their moments alone.

That sector of the evening couldn't last forever, unfortunately. An inebriated Abraxas interrupted them and began exclaiming something about Wrong Skiing Faints, or something along the lines, and at the same time, an inebriated Viridian Nott and Priscilla Parkinson began to talk to them. They inevitably got separated into two different conversations that became inescapable.

He wasn't sure if it pertained to all drunk people, but he'd learned

recently that when his Knights were drunk, they were *unbearably* clingy.

“Tom! Happy New Year!” Viridian babbled, hand-in-hand with his girlfriend. He’d clearly forgotten what the celebration was for. It was not yet midnight, either. “You haven’t met yet – this is my girlfriend, Cilla!”

“You silly goose, I’ve been in Tom’s classes for the last six years.”

“Really? Wow, you’re so smart, baby.”

Tom almost regurgitated the tart he’d consumed five minutes prior as the couple exchanged the most disgusting public display of affection he’d ever seen – with just their *eyes.* He was never, ever, ever, touching a bottle, if that was he would be reduced to.

“Excuse me,” he said, but his arm was grabbed by a clingy Viridian. Tom wondered why he’d given Abraxas the pass to supply alcohol. It was truly more hassle than what a loosened tongue was worth.

“Wait, wait, wait, Tom, I was going to say something!” Viridian scrunched up his face, as if attempting to recall was the hardest thing he’d ever done.

“It’s his birthday,” Priscilla whispered very audibly.

“I don’t think that was it,” Viridian said, sounding very troubled. “Happy birthday, though, Tom.” A pause. “Is that your full first name, or are you a Thomas? A Tomothy? Or are you a Quinton? My Uncle Quinton goes by Tom…”

“He goes by Quinn, silly.”

“Oh, does he?”

Tom didn’t know if he wanted to cast *Obliviate* on himself, or if he wanted to shove a Sobering Concoction down Viridian’s oesophagus, or if he wanted to do something incredibly violent.

Probably not the last one. Viridian was so hammered that he wouldn’t even remember a punishment. It would be an utter waste of time.

“OH!” Viridian exclaimed abruptly, just as Tom was attempting another escape. He was louder than every other conversation in the room, which was saying quite a lot. “I was going to say I met your

boyfriend! My impless – imp – um, that word, was that he was – uh. Strange. Um – strong? You should tell him you want to kiss him, I think. Cilla, what do you think?"

The irony, that Viridian was half of the reason he was currently not talking to Harry, was not lost on him. It *was* lost on both of the couple, drunk as they were.

Not wanting to witness Priscilla Parkinson devour a man's mouth – because that was what it looked like was about to happen – Tom finally managed to run away.

He did contemplate the advice, which he wasn't sure was a good idea. Viridian couldn't even say *impression,* for Salazar's sake. Still, Viridian's senseless inebriated state didn't stop him from looking through the crowd, staring at Harry's side profile, and fantasizing about following through.

Tom decided that there must be some alcohol vaporising into the room and imbuing him with drunkenness. Or perhaps, the state was contagious. Kissing Harry in the middle of a crowded room – that was not a normal Tom thought.

He was saved from doing something senseless by suddenly realising that Druella had taken it upon herself to ensure the younger years didn't touch the Firewhiskey. *Offer gratitude first, drive of the senselessness, then go over,* he told himself.

"Don't think on it," Druella responded. She flicked her wand towards Conan Dolohov and Sebastien Travers, on the far end of the centre table. A bottle whizzed out of their collective grasp, and into her own. "It's your birthday, you should be having fun – would you like a drink?"

She offered him the bottle, and Tom shook his head no. His eyes were tracing the room, attempting to find Harry again. The boy had managed to move somewhere in the span of thirty seconds.

Druella chuckled as she followed his actions. "Never thought I'd see the day you pined over someone, Riddle."

Tom distantly remembered turning down her own request for an outing to Hogsmeade the previous year. He hoped she still wasn't caught up about that.

"I think you should heed your own advice to the youngsters, and lay

off the drinks," Tom said as politely as he could manage, and left her by the table.

"I think you misinterpreted me," she called behind him, and Tom really didn't care if he did or didn't.

As Tom walked over where Harry and a drunk Abraxas had relocated to, he wondered how the atmosphere had devolved so quickly. It had been loud, before – but it hadn't been *raucous*.

"Hello, Abraxas," Tom said, dismissively. He turned his attention fully to Harry, and rested a hand upon the boy's shoulder. "You said you wanted to give your gift in private, darling?"

Harry turned and frowned at him. "You want to leave now? Isn't that rude, to leave your own party?"

At that very moment, someone chose to yell out above all the noise, "TEN MINUTES!"

Tom had predicted the bleeding of a New Year's celebration into his party weeks ago, but he truly could not have hoped for better timing.

He was only slightly annoyed by his lack of control over the events – he'd never particularly cared for his party in the first place. It had primarily been a way to unnecessary pressure and torment Abraxas for a month straight, then secondly a way to pluck information from or recruit Harry – though that goal had changed to something more intimate. Only *thirdly* had it been a seventeenth birthday celebration.

"I don't think it's my party anymore," he pointed out.

Abraxas had been staring dumbly at him up until that point. Tom had the impression he'd been struggling to understand through his inebriation.

"Wha'ya mean, cor- course 'tis." Abraxas scrunched up his face and began to speak slower, but still failed to enunciate his words properly. "You've gotta yell at everyone, like, like – say, Tom s'there more cake?"

There were standing right next to the remaining quarter of his plain vanilla cake.

"No," Tom told him.

The heaviest frown formed on Abraxas's face. "Damn," he said. "That's. I think that's really twa – trad – tragic. 'Twas good. Really good."

You ordered it, Tom wanted to scream at him. *And you were the one who turned your nose down at my requested flavour because it wasn't traditional Elderberry.*

"We're leaving," Tom told Harry, and he dragged the boy alongside with him. Harry was too busy laughing to protest.

Tom cast a ward over the table with his presents as they exited.

"How did you get friendly with Abraxas?" he asked, bitterness intertwined with his words, imbued with every step they took down the corridor.

"I asked him a question a couple of days ago," Harry replied, enigmatically. "Don't look at me like that – it was related to your gift. We struck up a conversation about Quidditch after."

It really spoke volumes about how much time they spent together recently, that Tom could not even fathom when Harry had managed to track Abraxas down and hold a conversation.

"You like him," he stated. "You were holding your awful blank look with almost everyone tonight, but you were laughing with him. I was under the impression you had no fondness for the Malfoys."

Harry made an exasperated noise. "I could write an entire novel about my relationships with three generations of Malfoys and Malfoys by marriage, but at the end of the day – there's nothing to be jealous of, you dolt."

Tom opened his mouth in protest. "I'm not-"

"Hush," Harry interrupted, turning him the other way in the corridor. "We need to go outside for my gift."

"*Outside?"* Tom uttered, an involuntary shiver running down his spine. "Are you mad? It must be negative two-seventy-five outside."

Harry stopped, sent him a *look*, and then continued on.

"The dramatics never cease. Don't worry, I'll keep you warm."

"It's still surely far, far below freezing-" but Tom's protests died in his

throat as Harry draped an arm around his waist and boy's body heat seeped into his.

He could not explain why Harry was so warm. He toyed with the idea that it was a psychological thing, associating warmth and comfort with someone who embodied those concepts, but Harry was more than lukewarm. He ran *hot,* only one step away from feverish.

It was a clear night out, and there was no wind. Hogwarts stretched behind them, majestic, and the Forbidden Forest lay in the distance before them, daunting. There was a sliver of a moon in the sky.

All in all, it meant that the conditions were near the best they could possibly be, for stargazing in a December-or-January (Tom wasn't sure on the time) night. Harry seemed immensely pleased about this fact, commenting on it as he ceased holding Tom's waist to pull out his gift.

Tom was not pleased by the lack of warmth but thankfully, this was quickly compensated for. Harry conjured an extremely luminescent light yellow flame from the tip of his wand, instead of using a simpler *Lumos* for Tom to see as he unwrapped.

(Tom thought the arm around his waist had been nicer, even if not quite as warm compared to magical fire.)

He hadn't expected much from Harry's gift, if he were honest. Harry didn't have access to the Potter's wealth, and so he'd presumed the inexpensiveness was why the boy hadn't wanted to present it before the congregation of his party.

But – no. Harry had gone above and beyond.

The boy had gifted him a large golden pocket watch. It was a half-hunter style, the annulus cover taking the form of an ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail. The design was intricate, each scale visible under the flicker of Harry's flame.

Tom flipped the cover over. In comparison, the clockface was rather plain – black with golden digits. If anything, however, it suited the intricate outside.

"It's traditional to give a wizard a watch when he turns of age," Harry said, smiling, gaze distant. *Reminiscing.* Tom looked down realised Harry wore a golden wristwatch – that must be the cause. "I didn't know if anyone else was planning to give you one, that's what I asked Abraxas about. I thought he'd probably have the best idea, since he

was organising."

Harry paused, and leaned over. "There's more, um-", he said as he pressed down on the crown. To Tom's stunned disbelief, the golden Roman numerals and the clock hands swirled until they reformed into a compass.

"I had lots of short-lived obsessions after I quit the Aurors, and enchanted clocks happened to be one of them. My best friend's family had a clock that told the vague locations of everyone, see."

Tom nodded. Wondering if there was more, he pressed the crown again. He was delighted to witness the gold swirl amongst the black backdrop again. It was such a simple but sleek design, he couldn't help admire how seamless the charmwork was.

The gold reformed into a lunar phase clock, this time. One hand that was pointed to a golden cartoonish depiction of a crescent moon.

"I wanted to add an entire star chart, but, uh, the clockface is too small for that," Harry continued. "There's probably a way around that, like Muggles have this idea of holographs and stuff, but I didn't know how to do that."

"I've never seen anything like it – you Transfigured and enchanted it yourself?"

"Um, yes. There's a few runes inscribed inside the watch itself, I made the spells all permanent. I hope it all holds up to scrutiny."

"It's *gorgeous,*" Tom replied. He pressed the crown again, watching the gold swirl back into a clock face. "Truly. Innovative, thoughtful, too. I couldn't possibly say anything that would do this justice."

He couldn't resist pressing the crown several times, watching the gold swirl and swirl again. It was all so seamless and satisfying to watch. He had no idea how it had been enchanted, a novel experience.

"Thank you so much - I adore it. I'm going to have a lot of fun figuring out how it works, so don't tell me."

Harry chuckled lightly from beside him "You're welcome."

Tom closed the half-hunter cover, tore his gaze from the artefact – because in a few short minutes it had become important enough to be classed as such – and pocketed it. He turned his gaze upon Harry, and

wondered if anyone had ever been so *incredible* in the history of the universe.

Harry's own gaze was on the night sky.

"You know," he said, tone distant. "In 1969, Muggles will land on the moon."

"Oh?" Tom replied, not really listening, too fascinated by the shadows that flit across Harry's face, courtesy of flames dancing from his wand. The lighting really wasn't the best, but there was no doubt about it: Harry was stunning, mesmerising.

"Yeah. There was a whole space race. It didn't go any further than the moon, though – I'm not sure why. Too expensive?"

"Probably," Tom hummed, eyes tracing ever line and contour of Harry's face. His features were sharp and angular, but there was softness in the curl of his lip, in his eyes.

"A lot of good sci-fi- programmes were birthed in the era. Star Trek, Doctor Who, Thunderbirds – Star Wars came later. Dudley – my cousin – was too stupid, so he never liked watching them, but sometimes he'd leave the tele running and I'd catch snippets. I'm looking forward to watching them all from their premiere. Is that silly?"

Harry, the little whir of indecipherability, turned his head. Tom recognised it as a questioning motion, but he hadn't heard the question. He watched Harry's breath puff out in a cloud that rose upwards into oblivion, and he suddenly concluded that he could not stand one more minute. He thought he might go mad with want.

"I've no idea, can I kiss you?"

Harry's mouth formed a polite 'o', before he regained control of his facial features.

In the terrible second that passed with no response, Tom realised what people meant by having a heart sink into their boots.

It passed, however, that terrible-awful-what-the-fuck second passed, and it thank *fuck* it passed onto better seconds, because Tom's heart-in-his-boots couldn't deal with anything worse. Harry non-verbally flipped his flame into a not-so-deadly *Lumos,* and then tugged him down by the lapels, mouth hovering right before Tom's.

“I wanted to kiss you so badly, earlier,” Harry confessed, and then Tom learned what it meant to be kissed – gently, sweetly, as lovingly as a whisper of wind and as keenly as a star about to go supernova.

“Oh?” he murmured, heart aflame as they exchanged breaths as though they were each other’s lifeline.

“You were so happy – it was nice. I didn’t want to take away from your Apparition victory.”

So that was the reason. Acceptable, because he’d never had someone care so much for his *happiness* before, and because Harry was making it up for it now. He was warming Tom from the inside out and outside in, holding him with a steady hand on his back, kissing him like it was a new constant in his life.

“Harry,” he said, suddenly pulling backwards. “You’re not inebriated, are you? You’re not going to change your mind? You’re not going to say this was a mistake, come morning?”

“No, and no, and no again, I’ve had plenty of time to think.”

“Good.”

Tom kissed him, and then Harry kissed him, and then it was unclear who was kissing who, who was laughing joyfully and who was expressing all their emotions at once.

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Somewhere between the clichés of *it was a dark and stormy night* and *happily ever after*, a mistrustful boy who had sought immortality on the count of power, greed and not succumbing to death, became a man that found value in trust and learned what it meant to be alive.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, this was supposed to be goofy. It became decidedly less goofy. It became a monster that ate at my university work. Oops.

Thanks to everyone who kudo'ed and commented along the way,

it brought me joy to see other people enjoying this story <3 Hope y'all liked this chapter too :)

This is the official end to the story so I'm marking it as complete, but I do have plans for an epilogue that will clean up a couple of loose ends (aka the perpetual question of why Death dumped Harry here lmao). It'll probably be a few months away, though.

For now (and the next few months until the epilogue, or possibly-but-hopefully-not-forever), I leave you with this:

Tom: Harry, darling, Randolph got me a camera.
Harry:
Tom: So, of course, the first photo I get taken is going to be one of *us*.
Harry: Well... I suppose petty revenge is justified.
Tom: Great. I'll display it on my bedside cabinet.

Randolph:
Randolph: wait this wasn't the plan

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